



**Vital Ground:**

**A sculptural investigation of the perceptions of Rock Island  
Bend on the Franklin River, Tasmania**

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## INTRODUCTION



Image 1 – *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*. (1979). Peter Dombrovskis. Photograph. 61x75cm. (National Library of Australia 2015).

This research project is framed as a case study to investigate how an individual's perception, and hence understanding of a site, might be affected by engagement with art informed by the site in question. This process has involved exploring connections between how we encounter and experience an artwork (inspired by a site), and subsequently documenting how understanding and perception are altered once we experience the site itself. The project employs scientific cognitivism<sup>1</sup>, and explores how processes of visual analysis influence our perception of a particular location.

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<sup>1</sup> J.B. Simus' writing in 2009 takes a long path through Scientific Cognitivism (the premise that knowledge increases appreciation, and hence how an artwork is perceived) and he concludes that scientific cognitivism has an artistic as well as educational (or pedagogical) value.

Rock Island Bend (RIB) is a site known to most Tasmanians only through Peter Dombrovskis' famous *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend, Franklin River, Tasmania*, 1979 image.

The understanding of this site, with its reputed beauty and value, is almost entirely defined by that one image for even when people visit RIB they tend to return with renewed versions of the original Dombrovskis image, rather than newly developed representations of the site<sup>2</sup>.

In their attempt to understand and engage with site, they do so based upon what they've learned, experienced and been taught; each viewer brings their life experiences and inherited culture to each aesthetic moment whether framed by a site or an artwork. But how do our lives, our personas, experiences, and nuances influence what, and how we see and understand, and how does that understanding vary over time?

### **Background to the Project**

Due to its remote location in Tasmania's South-West wilderness area, and high difficulty of access, relatively few Tasmanians have ever actually visited RIB. This site is however well known and commonly acknowledged as a 'local,' albeit remote, wilderness site. The broad familiarity of RIB is primarily due to the photograph *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*<sup>3</sup> being used across the country as the signature image of the Franklin-Gordon dam protests of the early 1980s<sup>4</sup>. Prior to this project, I also had never visited the actual site, however I readily identified with the image as an exemplar of pristine wilderness, worthy of conservation. The power of this image sparked a certain curiosity that inspired me to research my relationship to the site and to model how that understanding might be changed over time.

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<sup>2</sup> Based upon personal experience and research. During the period 2015-2017 of this project I found fewer than five images on the internet that were taken at RIB. These were not based upon the physical perspective of Peter Dombrovskis' image. I found no images on the internet depicting the rear side of the island itself.

<sup>3</sup> *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* 1979 was first published on 3 March 1983 as part of the Greens protest campaign in a national media series three days before the Australian federal election. The image was published in full Herald Gravure Colour in full page spreads of the Sydney Morning Herald, The Age and The Courier Mail at a time when most newspapers remained black and white. The image was hugely influential and became inextricably linked with the concept of Tasmanian wilderness and Tasmania as a clean and wild location (Bonyhady, 2004 and Scott, 2015)

<sup>4</sup> In one of the earliest large-scale conservation movements, the early 1980s in South-West Tasmania saw an organised blockade of construction of a proposed hydro-electric dam. The protest was divisive and protracted within a small regional community, yet gained national and international attention. Ultimately the protest was successful and now the region has been declared a World Heritage area.

I have lived, studied and worked as a Scientist, Geologist, Engineer, Firefighter, Artist and Soldier. I have other character traits such as my passion for history, romantic view on life, and particular emotional responses to my world, which combine to make me the individual that I am. Each of these traits and learned skills contribute in large part to my character. In the context of this project I have referred to these traits and their associated skillsets collectively as ‘my personas’; the parts of me that make me who I am. So how do these personas impact on what I see and understand of Rock Island Bend, both in relation to the image and via real life encounter?

When viewers’ understanding of a site such as RIB is so clearly influenced by a famous image, an expectation is created by viewing the respective artwork before visiting the site itself. Of course the viewer may subsequently visit the site and experience it for themselves, however the viewer must then ask themselves during that visit, does the site live up to or even exceed their expectations? How does it compare to what they perceive in Peter Dombrovskis image? And, when the site is seen in person, what is lost, gained or reframed? And finally, after the visit is complete, the memory of the site is retained, meaning time and distance also play a significant role in this *encounter ecosystem*.

This research is framed through the lens of one person’s experiences accrued over time. This investigation documents how my anticipations, experience and memory combine to collectively define the experience in my life. The project subsequently employs this personal journey as a lever to manifest diverse perspectives of RIB, geared to affect broader, established understandings.

### **Outline of the Practical Enquiry**

I have divided the project in four chronological phases: 1. “Anticipations and Expectations” - prior to visiting the site / considering what I see and understand when viewing Peter Dombrovskis’ image, 2. “Experience” - Being at the site and reflecting on how those few hours at RIB affected me and my perceptions of the place, 3. “Memory” - that documents how after leaving the site, my perceptions became based upon a combination of my expectations and first-hand experience, and how in hindsight my perceptions continued to change and 4. “Communication and Transference” - where I examined my new-found awareness and understanding, and as an artist / sculptor attempted to affect other viewers’

RIB experience; to explore if my artworks, in conjunction with the Dombrovskis image, could trigger an alternate understanding and appreciation of the site than what might be gleaned from the image alone.

I employed a “hat” metaphor as a system through which to view and document my journey<sup>5</sup>. That is, in order to break down and consider the site via my differing personas, I ‘wore’ each persona’s “hat” and viewed the site as an Engineer, Geologist or Soldier etcetera. Whilst in these personas I would write, draw, photograph and create diverse, speculative artworks. Inspired by the very nature of adopting differing personas, I did not limit myself to any particular medium or technique, but employed techniques and equipment appropriate to an Engineer, Geologist, and Soldier etcetera.

The title for this research became apparent through one of the key techniques I applied. Whilst in my Soldier persona I conducted a military Terrain Analysis<sup>6</sup> of the site, examining the key factors, influences, and possible actions that could occur at RIB. One aspect of this process was to determine the *Vital Ground*<sup>7</sup> of RIB. This term defines the site from which military strength is drawn which became an ideal model for how I relate to RIB as the site for which I feel a greatest affinity; a place that gives me strength and hope.

This often divergent hybrid, of the objective / analytical combined with the subjective / creative methodology, has resulted in a diverse output that includes drawing, writing, and photographs through to found objects, sculpture, digital drawing and performative actions.

### **Overview of the Exegesis**

*Chapter One* provides the main introduction, contextual and theoretical underpinnings of the research, focussing on our understanding of Site, Aesthetic Experience, the conceptual process that is scientific cognitivism, and its influence on this research project.

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<sup>5</sup> This persona-based “hat” system is analogous to Eduard DeBono’s “Six Thinking Hats” model. The imaginary hats each represent a style and direction of thinking (DeBono 2014), however, in this case, the hats are reference my character and personality.

<sup>6</sup> Terrain Analysis: the collection, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation of geographic information on the natural and man-made features of the terrain, combined with other relevant factors, to predict the effect of terrain on military operations. (Wagner 2014)

<sup>7</sup> The military definition of Vital Ground is “an area of ground of such tactical importance, that if lost to the enemy, it will make it impossible to win the battle... The piece of land from which you draw your strength”. (ADFP Glossary 101 2012).

*Chapter Two* outlines the methodologies, motivations and processes behind a selection of outputs, experiences and artefacts. Additionally, this chapter addresses a suite of broader issues relating to site selection, processes, and perceived successes and failures, and my attempts to bring the disparate outputs into a coherent narrative.

*Chapter Three* contains a synopsis of the research project results. This chapter is framed through four phases where each of the outputs that relate to my specific personas, along with their perceptions, are outlined in tandem with the associated artworks and experiments.

*The Conclusion* integrates the diverse project outputs and considers whether the aims and objectives were achieved. Additionally, comments to support the relevance of the research, and potential utility for the field of the visual arts, are made here.

## **CONTEXT**

### **Introduction**

This project concurs with the view that much of a viewer's experience, enjoyment and appreciation of an artwork is affected by the viewer's own history, knowledge and experience.

Danto (2004) subscribed to philosopher Immanuel Kant's premise that engaging with art consists of the viewer making meaning of what they see. This supports Gianluca Consolis' (Consolis, 2012) proposition that an aesthetic experience, whether experienced through an artificial construct or a natural phenomenon, derives from an individual's own imagination and experience: when an individual is viewing art or a 'real life' object, site or experience, everything that constitutes the viewer's knowledge system is brought to that moment. This Kantian concept forms the foundation of this research project: that I (as the case study) bring all my experiences, my previous life and learning, to a moment of encounter.

My life experiences permeate the way I see the world, I am the sum of the culture I live in and the ups, downs and otherwise of my life, shape how I as an individual relate to a site (Krug, 2003). I was raised in a middle-class, well-educated and stable family. My childhood was an adventure of camping, travel and the outdoors. My education was sound and I trained initially as an ecologist and geologist then served for many years as an Army Officer and Engineer, and I currently volunteer as a Firefighter in the local bush brigade. I have a love of history and my friends tell me that I am a romantic at heart. This research project employs these diverse facets of my character as discrete personas; as lenses through which to frame encounter, and over time documents these multiple perspectives in response to a local site of significance. This project is then an attempt to demonstrate how each of these 'life facets' influence how I perceive, interpret and engage the world at large.

As a Scientist, Geologist, then an Engineer and Army Officer, my vocational history is resoundingly analytical if not practical. This pragmatic bias, informed by my studies, the values instilled upon me by my parents, family, schooling, training and past employment, lie somewhat reluctantly at times, next to my more instinctive or innately romantic side. As a consequence, I live in a world of head versus heart where there is much to be gained from

the collision and collaboration, between my objective and subjective thoughts, ideas and responses.

Examples of this rational versus emotive *conflict* will be described in the *Results chapter* where an objective understanding of force vectors, or the reductionist approach to colour theory, enable me as a viewer and artist, to produce new ways of seeing and interpreting site. Taking this to another level the objective 'head' comprehension, resulting from distilling the components of Dombrovskis' image were filtered through my encounter with the site itself, providing a renewed 'site perspective', language and mode of expression.

This chapter addresses the contextual research that has informed the project, exploring how we collectively perceive a location, how I perceive a site through my initially reductionist approach, and how diverse methodologies, inspired by my previous occupations and roles, such as *Terrain Analysis*, and text-based methodologies, have been incorporated within the studio experimentation.

Given the particular methodological nature of this project I will define some key terms:

### **Aesthetic Experience**

A contemporary definition of *Aesthetics*<sup>8</sup> allows for a holistic understanding of how individual tastes and/or values may differ, and that aesthetic experience is just a visual engagement where one's attention is focused upon the objective (Shelly 2009 and Simmons 2016). In alignment with this theory, this project is an investigation of how scientific cognitivism impacts aesthetic experience. In addition, the project explores how this impact can be communicated to others with a view to expanding their perception of a site.

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<sup>8</sup> Although the term aesthetics is commonly associated with the concept of beauty and taste, 'aesthetics' as a concept was initially used to frame levels of value in artworks, materials, character and experiences (Shelly 2009 and Simmons 2016). Historically, theories and philosophical approaches towards beauty (and hence aesthetics) have been developed, such as early Rationalism versus Immediacy (that beauty arises from either understanding or applying principles versus a feel for beauty based upon our taste.), and the arguments of the centrality of formalist approaches versus experiential understanding (Shelly 2009).

## Site

*Site* in this context is a geographical concept, the location on the earth and has a distinct set of characteristics: geographic coordinates, landforms, climate, vegetation, soil, and minerals etcetera (Briney 2016). However, *Site* as a concept which we construct cognitively, is an entirely artificial concept: we move through our lives in a continual state of perception and understanding which in turn implies that every individual has a different perception of a site. Everyone has lived a different life, and taken their own path to arrive at any one site, therefore our perceptions are our own. Miwon Kwon (2002) discusses site-specificity and its relation to art through positing site as a physical and tangible reality defined by measureable depth, length, texture etc., however it is also a malleable concept that can be relocated within the art context, and thus transfers to other audiences an authentic experience of the original site.

As an artist who now lives between two cultures, that of Lebanon and the West, Mona Hatoum, explores many political and gender related themes, however she also explores the concept of home and identity (Antoni 1998 and Masters 2008). Whilst Hatoum's works are rarely site-specific or address any single location, I found these works and references intriguing particularly for their use of artefacts and performance to portray a connection to, or understanding of a personal connection to a site. Hatoum describes her working process during a residency at Sabbath Day Lake with a Shaker community as responding to the "feeling of settledness and warm domesticity, ... The work I made there happened very organically and ... this situation gave me permission to work with simple craft processes, maybe even reconnect with a gentle side of myself" (Masters 2008). This idea of location and site giving rise to an artistic response, both in understanding and methodology, parallels my approach to RIB where I allowed my accrued understanding of the site to drive my collective responses and studio practice.





Image 2 – *Home* (1999). Mona Hatoum. Wooden table, 15 steel kitchen utensils, electric wire, 3 light bulbs, software and audio. 3.5x6m. Tate Gallery (Taylor 2003)

Robertson Smithson in his *Unpublished Essays* [in Flam (1996)] proposed his tentative concept of *nonsites*. For Smithson, the metaphorical space between an actual site, and the dimensional representation of that site, whilst resembling the site, is not a picture or illustration of the site. The metaphorical space between an abstracted map and the site is the *nonsite*; where between viewing the map and arriving at the actual place, there is potential for diverse understandings to occur. A *map* of a *nonsite* may use many descriptors and methods of measurement, each equally valid, however none of which present a completely true, nor accurate rendition of the site itself.

Between 1968-70 Smithson produced a series of maps paired with a container, mirror or object from an actual site and relocated them within a gallery space. The secondary gallery site became a conceptual space that bore a relationship with a location and the artefacts as seen in the gallery, however their relationship existed in viewers' minds as an abstract place.



Image 3 – *Non-site* (1968). Robert Smithson. Crates, maps and found rocks. 4x6m (approx.). Oberhausen, Germany (Lucarelli, 2014)

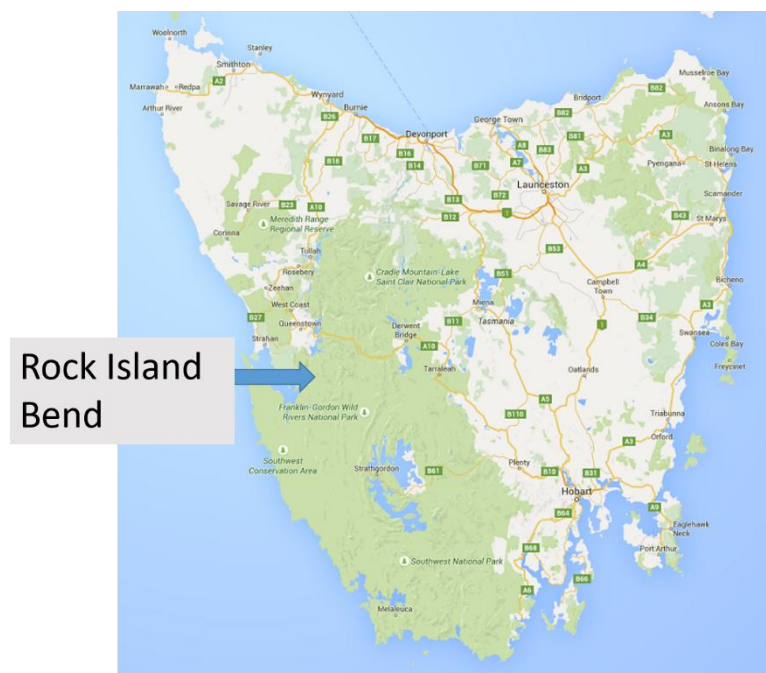
Smithson's *nonsite* concept has rich parallels with the *Anticipation and Expectation* phase of this research project, where an understanding and expectation of RIB is established by the viewer through the lens of Peter Dombrovskis' camera. If the viewer ever visits the RIB site, they will be exposed to infinite physical and sensorial variables that cannot be fully embodied through a map or via *representational* objects in a gallery space.

However, in Krug (2003) the concept of place (that is, site) is defined from a union of physical, spiritual, historical and social factors within a geographical region. Krug's use of broad categories based around our own past and perceptions as a model to understand *site* is key to this case study. A site may be described in merely geographical terms, however this does nothing to reveal or assimilate *site* on a social, emotional or experiential level, the very mechanisms through which we build broader relationships to place.

Vanclay, *et al* (2008) describe place as being "space imbued with meaning". Thus like Krug (2003), site has significance beyond just the physical, it is a combination of the biophysical, social and spiritual. Whilst each of these theories are valid in and of their own accord, site is

an infinite combination of these factors, with each viewer bringing their own cultural and experiential history to their engagement with any place.

Our understanding of a site can be influenced and heightened by artists' interpretations. An artist's 'site work' can shape our expectations, and augment the perspective of a site through social, historical or other factors, that have been considered by the artist. Whilst Miwon Kwon (2002) refers to art being changed and influenced by site, a reversal must also hold true; that *site-attuned* art can in turn alter our understanding and relationship to a site.



**Figure 1** – Location of Rock Island Bend (source: Google Maps, 2016, at <https://www.google.com.au/maps/@-42.2245931,146.5920111,8z?hl=en>)

Rock Island Bend is located at 42.4225S, 145.7484E in the South West region of Tasmania, as part of the Franklin-Gordon Wild Rivers National Park. RIB is situated on the Franklin River, approximately 7.5Km East of the lower reaches of the Gordon River and the bottom end of Macquarie Harbour. Mount McCall is 11Km to the north-northwest – the nearest (and only) vehicle access point.

RIB is an incised limestone and sandstone valley, formed along faulted boundaries, with generally sclerophyll and temperate forest on poor soils. The site is subject to significant rainfall and the temperature ranges from below freezing to dry, *Mediterranean*. The natural

light is generally diffused through cloud cover for much of the year. At the river level, within due to the river aspect and surrounding high relief cliffs, direct sunlight is limited, whilst the sun is overhead from late morning to mid-afternoon.

RIB is significant to me as a site that transcends its physical, quantifiable features and morphs into the relatively slippery terrain of subjective experience. The geology, biology and natural history of the site operate as mere components of a more complex, experiential and unfolding composition. When first viewing the site in Peter Dombrovskis' image I felt a love of the wildness, the isolation, the implied power and strength of both the terrain and the river's force. The image provided me with an understanding of the dangers, the natural threats, the feeling of loneliness. However, when I eventually visited the site, these feelings were supplemented by the smell of rotting vegetation and the tang from the tannin that stains the river like strong, stewed black tea. When I was at RIB, for a brief time I could feel the excitement of the perceived risk; one flood and I would no longer be separated from a Neolithic ancestral existence, I would instead be living the life of a person immersed in and entirely dependent upon the reality of what the site is made of and driven by.



Image 4 – *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*. (1979). Peter Dombrovskis. Photograph. 61x75cm. (National Library of Australia 2015).

Dombrovskis' image is linked indelibly to Tasmania's recent history related to the Franklin-Gordon Dam protests in the early 1980s, however the site itself has other social, historic and scientific aspects. As RIB is only accessible by a week-long white-water rafting expedition it remains out of reach for most Tasmanians, however it still forms an important part of the Tasmanian identity as defined by Peter Dombrovskis' image.

It is important to note that although the social, historical and spiritual all contribute to a sense of a site or place, a site is often initially defined by a particular physical feature (Vanclay *et al*, 2008). In the case of RIB, the specific site differs from the rest of the location due to the physical presence of the island, bend and river. These collective physical factors combine to create the focal point that triggers individual and collective perceptions.

### **Perspective and the Act of Framing**

Dell Upton in *Understanding Ordinary Landscapes* (Groth *et al*, 1997) states that in any landscape scene, there are two narratives: the seen and unseen. In any landscape image, as in *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, the artwork contains the experience of seeing the form of the landscape, as well as an embodied narrative based upon the content and context. Therefore, by considering an artist's view of a landscape as both illustrative and expressive, we acknowledge the two roles of seeing and of interpretation.

As Rebecca Solnit states in *Paglen* (2010) "artists are, at their best, honorary aliens seeing the familiar through strange eyes and the unseen in plain view... to see and make visible is often a protracted process of education, research and investigation" by the artist and the choices they make. An artist may choose the site, the direction, time of day, weather, medium and a host of other factors in order to express their chosen narrative of the site. In turn, the viewer experiences the artist's perspective only as the sum of those decisions; a conflation of the literal scene and the narrative that the artist wished to express.

Peter Dombrovskis rarely if ever cropped his images (Dombrovskis, E. 2016); his choices, that defined what and how he captured and expressed a site, were made as he composed and shot the image. Dombrovskis did not engage in post-production image manipulation as to him the image and photograph were an authentic record of the one place in time.



Therefore, at RIB Dombrovskis dealt with two perspectives; the physical scene, in addition to the influences of his personas that impacted the atmospheric and emotional narratives she chose to compose and express.

In any photographic or two dimensional artwork depicting a physical site the practical choices of perspective and the artist's intended narrative are referred to as the physical Point of View (objective fact), plus the Humanist Point of View (subjective, the perspective of the viewer based upon their experiences or choices) [Robert Klein in *The Origin of Perspective* (Damisch 1979)]. As an artist I find myself moving freely between these two types of perspective, using one to inform and expand the options of the other. For example, a specific physical perspective such as a Plan view in the case of the *Defence of Rock Island Bend* series of artworks, reinforces the feeling of control, of omnipotent knowledge. Another example of physical perspective is my re-enactment of Dombrovskis' camera location to create the *Mosaic* artworks, where I both physically reproduced the image's lines of sight, and in doing so placed myself in Dombrovskis' actual position so I could reflect upon and experience, Dombrovskis' choices.

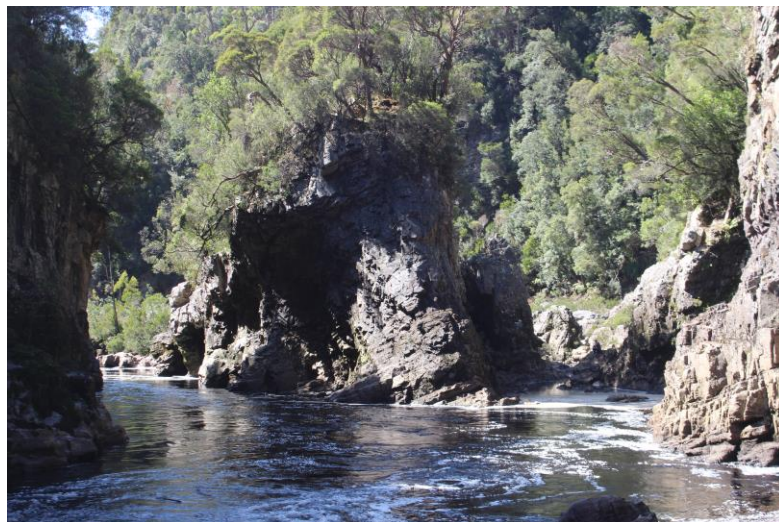


Image 5 – *Rock Island Bend*. (2015). Digital image taken from camera position of Peter Dombrovskis.  
Dimensions variable.

These actions became in effect an intervention and my own processes disrupted the original cycle of reception associated with Dombrovskis' RIB image. By intervening or adding to the RIB artwork's relations, I have in turn potentially influenced other viewers' perceptions of the site.

### **Reductionism and Scientific Cognitivism**

Allen Carlson proposed the concept of Scientific Cognitivism in 1981, that an aesthetic appreciation of nature is enhanced by the knowledge of the natural science depicted within the aesthetic methodology (Carlson 1981, Simus 2009, and Fritz 2013). Specifically, Carlson was referring to a knowledge of geology, biology and ecology when viewing nature through any medium or process, however, the principle applies equally to any knowledge and understanding of the natural processes represented either deliberately or unwittingly within an artwork. Both Carlson (1981) and Simus (2009) make the comparison that since a knowledge of art history and art theory inform the aesthetic appreciation of art, then a knowledge of sciences such as ecology and natural history in turn influence the aesthetic appreciation of nature.

Therefore, as in Guyer (2005), this research project links personal history to a qualitative experience of a site. Paul Guyer suggests the human experience of natural and artistic beauty is embodied in any aesthetic encounter, and consequently implied knowledge brought to the moment by the viewer. This is not solely with respect to encounters with artistic aesthetic engagements, but direct encounters with natural aesthetic moments that are also defined by inherent knowledge.

The conscious breaking down of exemplified scientific processes that may be depicted within an artwork into their formal categories is a reductionist approach. That is, utilising the heuristic process of reducing complex concepts or scenes to more basic and intellectually *digestible* components is a valid and productive method for enhancing understanding, and hence appreciation of complex concepts. Instead of just applying reductionism to scientific and rational problems or systems, this approach can also be used to see beyond Walter Benjamin's "optical unconscious" in order to delve more deeply into artistic aesthetic encounters<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin's concept of the optical unconscious examines the ability of technology, specifically photography, to record information and concepts below the threshold of the viewer's perception. This is inclusive of, but not restricted by, deliberate choices from the artist, and may be a factor of time, distance or serendipity. (Bunyan, 2013)

During my physical encounter with RIB, I initially employed a reductionist approach to break down the elements observed within Dombrovskis' *Rock Island Bend* photograph into separate components. I subsequently applied the "hats" of each of my identified personas to learn and understand how each of these discrete components influenced or filtered my encounter. This approach created a multifaceted viewpoint that transcended the results of viewing simply through the single iconic image. This process created a diverse collection of points of understanding and appreciation, which collectively manifested a richer comprehension of the site for me.

### **Terrain Analysis as an Outcome**

The military technique of *Terrain Analysis* is unrelated to the arts and aesthetic world. A *Terrain Analysis* is conducted as part of military planning before or during operations – as part of a process to develop a battle plan (in order to gain territory/defeat an enemy etc.). To conduct a *Terrain Analysis* is to seek out and analyse the environment in which the military force plans to fight, and as such, aspects of the terrain and environment are considered in isolation before a comprehensive, combined graphical representation is completed that captures an analytical view of the environment. This outcome is referred to as a *Modified Combined Obstacle Overlay* ("MCOO" pronounced "Muh-coo"). From the MCOO a commander can see where they can manoeuvre, the extent of visibility, what types of obstacles are present, what pieces of land are key and essential to the win the fight and claiming the *Vital Ground*. Within the project the site becomes a *Vital Ground*, the bend in the river, seen either in a disparate photograph or in person, is my focal point for understanding, appreciation and aesthetic experience.

When I apply these military techniques of *Terrain Analysis*, the process of viewing the site moves from objective facts to a holistic collection, where both objective and subjective responses become fused to develop my own understanding of the site. This is an understanding that synthesises those multifaceted views from my personas into one comprehensive view; the sum of my parts that defines my individual view of our world.

A number of writers and artists, such as writer Beth Carruthers (2006) and artist Ruth Watson (2009, and Ocula 2017), relate to artistic mapping and refer to artistic terrain,



however in these cases the *terrain* and *mapping* are referred to as part of a non-specific philosophical terrain of subject areas, sources of visual inspiration, contributors and debate. Ruth Watson utilises maps as a source material not as a found object, but rather displays them in unusual or imaginatively projected ways in order to force the viewer to challenge their perceptions and understanding of locations and their relationships to each other. Additionally, Watson utilises unusual materials in order to create maps that transform their meanings (Harmon 2009, Watson 2009 and Ocula 2017).



Image 6 – *Natural State* (2001). Ruth Watson. Pink plastic shopping bags, archival photomount, glass-headed pins. 160x160cm. (Ocula 2017)

The use of the term *Terrain Analysis* in this project's context is focussed on developing an understanding of the singular aesthetic experience of a site. The terrain in this case is not only associated with objective topography and climate, but also my subjective responses from cultural, historical and even spiritual dimensions.

Performance artists Gerry Smith and Bernhard Huwiler use the act of drawing to raise the viewers' awareness of context and surroundings, their engagement on location is intended to challenge the community they are passing through, forcing reassessment of site possibilities (Phister 1997). Smith and Huwiler worked as a pair, walking the streets with one drawing the full-scale map on the pavement in blue chalk, the other videotaping the trail.

Employing 'actions' to engage with a site is an approach that parallels my enquiry process: the action not only provides a physical connection to the exploration, but the deliberate use of video documenting is comparable with my use of contemporary Global Positioning Technology. These recreations of maps and scale representations of the sites are intended by Smith and Huwiler to be seen from the air, yet the performance takes place on an intimate, personal scale. I am intrigued and inspired by this ability to target multiple means of communication: live, from the air, and the visual record of video and stills photography, in order to achieve a multifaceted engagement with a wider audience.



Image 7 – *D is For Drawing* (1997). Gerry Smith and Bernhard Huwiler. Performance videoing tracing of old Chicago town plan in chalk to full scale on the streets of Chicago. Dimensions unknown. (Phister 1997).

Just as maps themselves may be treated as art (Harmon 2009) the military outcome is contingent on the viewing context, and the outcome of a *Terrain Analysis* (the MCOO) may itself operate as an aestheticized object. In the military domain, if the graphical representation of information cannot be read clearly and convey knowledge gained from the analysis, the process is irrelevant, and the MCOO becomes merely a decorative (non-pragmatic) representation. Similarly, if the artist cannot communicate to the viewer the intent of their vision, and relies solely on the viewer's own history to gain or determine the message, then the artwork may operate as a relatively limited aesthetic representation devoid of content. For an artist, the options for this visual communication are vastly broader than what a military planner is trying to convey. The artist's communication within an artwork could range between emotional to ideological, educative or even personal;

however, both the MCOO and the artist's site-related works rely upon cycles of reasoning, process and visual cues as part of their reception.

### **Understanding in Hindsight**

Time, duration and experience inform an understanding of a site, and the pairing of expectation with the memory of experience serve to inform an enduring recall specific to the encounter. Simon Schama (1995) argues that the zealous guarding of the memory of a site, can in and of itself, cause the artist and their vision to become "so rooted in a particular landscape that they become its 'spirit of the place'" (Schama, 1995, pp.17). There is no doubt that Peter Dombrovskis himself, through his image *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, has become inextricably linked with the site noting the image remains in *popular* print and is still seen today as the iconic image of the South West World Heritage Area.

The concept of memory, and our personal connection and understanding of our past, both individual and collectively, is a recurring theme in Anselm Kiefer's work (Leung 2016). The third phase of this research is *Memory*, where I attempt to gain an insight to how memory combines with our understanding from, before and during the visit to the site of Rock Island Bend, to create hindsight; the understanding we gain when looking back on past events in our lives. Kiefer's works associated with our processing of memories, often related to Germany's experiences and collective guilt prior to and during World War Two, provided an area of exploration for my research<sup>10</sup>. Whilst the facing of guilt forms a large part of Kiefer's memory works, his works also reference the processing of these memories, regeneration and hope. Kiefer's work, *Ways of Worldly Wisdom* (1980) (Image 8) impose the past and present in an attempt to process the memory of the Nazis appropriation of Germanic historical figures and mythology for their own propaganda ends. Whilst unrelated to site, the relevance to this project is in the way Kiefer uses the collective past and his individual present simultaneously to speak of the processing of that memory; to explore how the

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<sup>10</sup> Additionally, Kiefer's sculptural and installation style, pared back, simple, fundamental materials, repeating motifs and the use of text within the artworks, often with the use of irony, have been a source of inspiration in my own studio and exhibition practice for the last decade.

unfettered overlay of memory and experience in a single work is reflective of the collective processing of that moment.

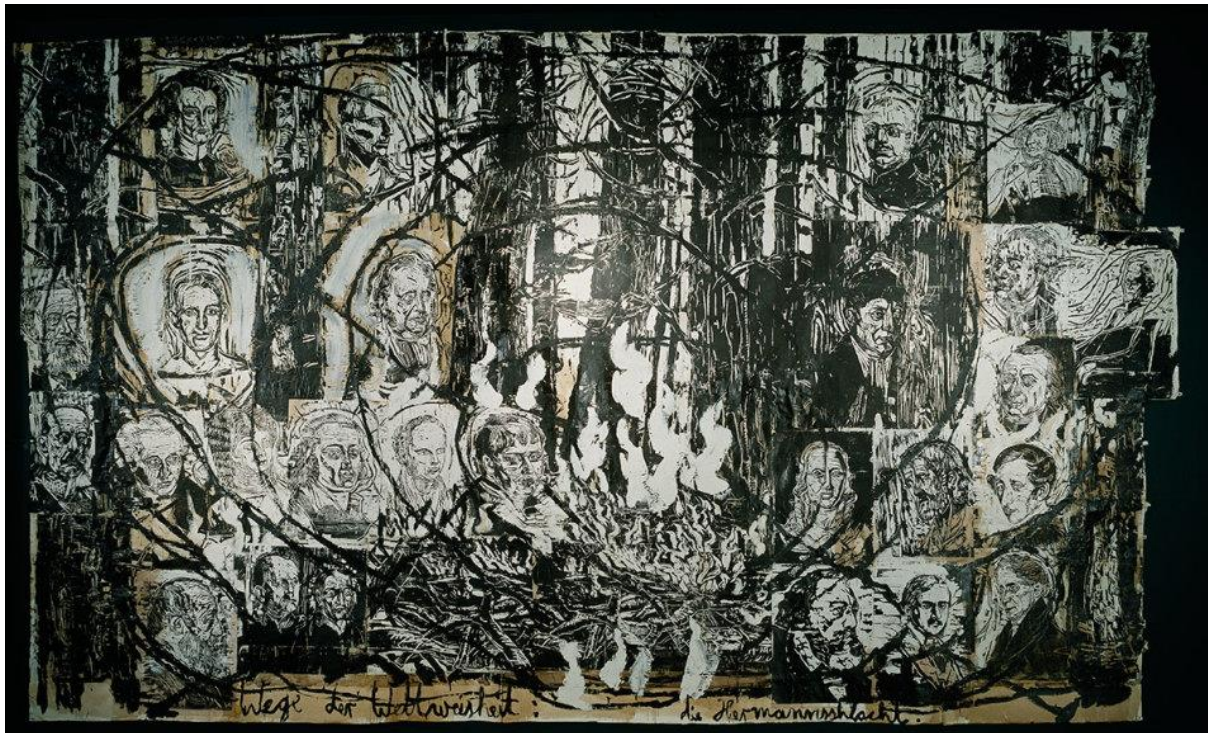


Image 8 - *Ways of Worldly Wisdom: The Battle of Hermann*. (1980). Anselm Kiefer. Ink, acrylic paint and collage on paper. 2.9x5m. Martijn and Jeannette Sanders, Amsterdam (Soriano 2014).

Emma Kay and her artworks *Worldview* (Kay 2013) and *Mind Muscle* as discussed in MacDonald (2002) demonstrate a rift between personal and collective memories; that a learned and cognitive understanding gained through study is ultimately a personal recollection; an essence of understanding that is unlikely to be scientifically accurate. In particular, Kay's art book, *Worldview* is an expansive history of the world, from the big bang to the millennium, written entirely from *unaided* memory. The work explores the personal aspect of memory and how our own schooling, readings and experiences is collectively how individually these shape our own perspectives. So too in this project, reductionism and learning through factual and cognitive analysis, do not only operate as a database of fact or discrete memories. The act of recombination mitigated through time, choice, design, physiology and a multitude of human facets will always result in a personalised interpretation (Fosh *et al*, 2015).

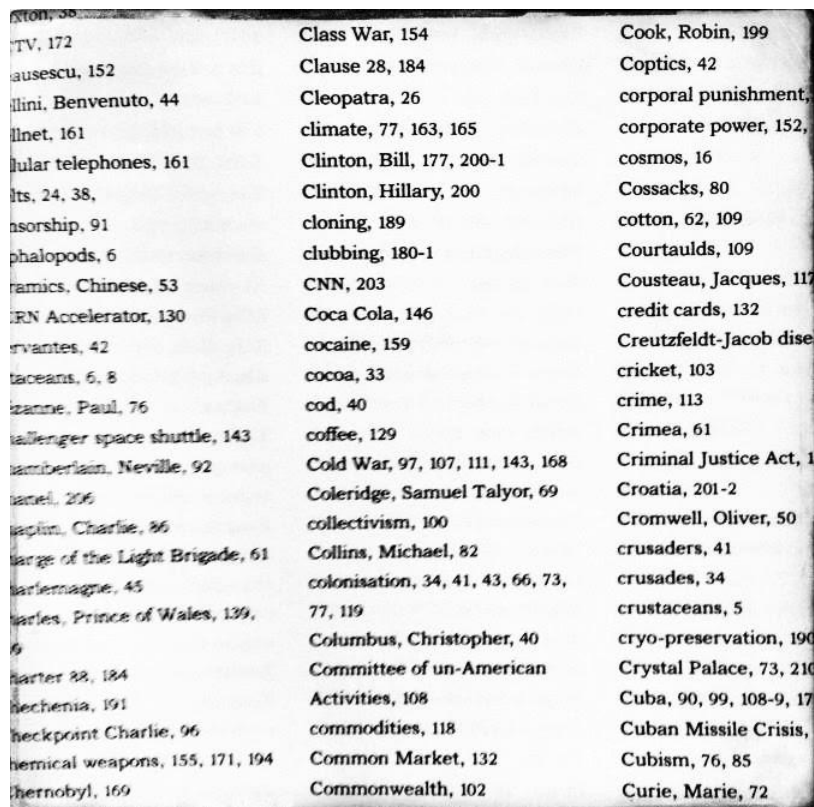


Image 9 – Extract of *Worldview* (1999). Emma Kay. Artbook. (Kay 2013).

This project attempts to relate reductionism to scientific cognitivism as a method of comprehension and learning, through two types of visual understanding: the view through an artist's 'eye' producing artwork in relation to a site, and a personal experience of a site, combined to create the overall experience and mode of encounter<sup>11</sup>.

This contextual research has informed my process of analysis. This process has formed part of my methodology, to be discussed in the next chapter. The following chapters will outline methodologies developed to address these issues and concepts within the project, in addition to mapping the subsequent outcomes and experiences.

<sup>11</sup> With regard to this process of Scientific Cognitivism, I relate to the works of Gabriel Orozco in addition to his attitude to his practice. Whilst Orozco may operate with an intent and subject matter not aligned with this project, his practice is unashamedly explorative and experimental; his works the result of responding to an inspiration rather than being driven by a medium or material (Bullosa 2007). I find Orozco's use of photography as a record, not as the artwork, and his ability to utilise any available material, as an exciting way to explore and work in the studio and field.

## **METHODOLOGY AND PROCESS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter provides an outline of the sequence of research, including site selection and practical considerations, key concepts and rationales as they relate to and influence the diverse approaches, an introduction to the RIB site, and a reflection on distinctive practical influences on methods undertaken within the research, in addition to some 'dead-end' (but still useful) lines of enquiry. The chapter concludes with a summary of the recurring themes and methods I have used to build a coherent research outcome from the vast variety of methods employed.

The following four sections will expand upon and describe works in detail, based upon the four phases of the research as described here.

### **Progression of the Work**

This project has evolved from my 2010 Honours work where I responded to Environmental Art practices, with a specific focus on the physical and psychological impact forces of nature have on human lives. From this, and a personal bias towards conservation and the concept of rewilding<sup>12</sup>, grew the seeds of this research.

This project was initially aimed at examining Environmental Art and its relationship to the conservation movement within Tasmania, however this proved to be a too broad and followed a theoretical approach, counter to my proposed practice led research project. Subsequent approaches utilised multiple individual views of a single Tasmanian conservation movement protest, to understand how viewers' experienced the memory of that incident through a series of related artworks, however, the breadth of information and

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<sup>12</sup> George Monbiot is a journalist and environmentalist who has lead a recent conservation philosophy that places man as part of the environment of nature, that being in the wild is not an absence of human influence, but achieved as part of a holistic ecosystem that is capable of repair. (Monbiot, 2013)



related research was considered to be beyond the scope of a two-year MFA research project.

Eventually I selected a single artwork - Peter Dombrovskis', *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, and a single site - RIB, Franklin River, South West World Heritage Area, Tasmania – with a view to limiting the project to my perspective, mediated through the dual lens of encountering the real site and the iconic artwork.

The first few months of research focused on undertaking a series of interviews with key individuals who had a personal connection with the Franklin Gordon Dam protest movements of the early 1980s. My intent at that point was to document and record what they saw and felt whilst viewing *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* directly linked with the now famous Tasmanian conservation events. These interviews proved to be of limited value to the research as the results were somewhat predictable<sup>13</sup>, the exception being the interview with Peter Dombrovskis' widow, Liz Dombrovskis. Liz's interview provided significant insight in to Peter Dombrovskis artistic intentions and thought processes, and in particular revealed that Dombrovskis framed his images entirely at the time of shooting the photograph, not as a part of post-production. In response to the Liz Dombrovskis' interview I was inspired to recalibrate the project to focus on recording and analysing my perspectives of the site and the artwork.

In the early stages of the project, in following the process and notional framework of *Terrain Analysis*, it became apparent that my understanding of the site would be made through a collection of as many perspectives as possible, not just physical perspectives, but also geographical, historic, fictional, and even emotional.

My intention became to go to the actual place on multiple occasions both to spend time immersed in the site to record and produce in-situ artworks, as well as providing a point of comparison over the changes of days, weather, light, water levels etcetera. However, as the project evolved a variety of practical restrictions determined that I was only able to

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<sup>13</sup> The predictability was a result of my methodology and subject selection. The protester was vehemently pro-conservation and the forestry worker was uncompromisingly anti-greens etcetera. The insights that I gained were unsurprising except in revealing some personal details of the subjects which did not directly influence my conclusions.

undertake a single site visit. This resulted in a focussed research methodology, albeit with multiple views, experiences, responses and chronologies.

Therefore, I consciously approached the viewing of the site initially through the singular image of Peter Dombrovskis', *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*, and then during a single visit, processed these two experiences of the one site using my *personas*, adopting reductionism and scientific cognitivism to deconstruct the experience. These specific personas, which already exist within me, have been applied consistently across all four phases of the research project: my initial expectations and previews of the site; real-life experience in the location; my attempt to garner understanding of the site from memory; and communicate this enhanced understanding of the site to others.

### **Perspectives**

The project set out to analyse diverse perspectives of the site that I, as the artist, can experience. That is, view the site through the various personas that make up 'me' as an ex-soldier, an ex-geologist, an ex-engineer, and having been an amateur historian etcetera. After considering the site through these diverse lenses, I then sought to reflect on how these persona-driven perspectives of the site varied over time whilst simultaneously relating and comparing them to the experience of my first visit (real-time experience) of RIB.

The passing of time enables the viewer of the site (in this case myself as the artist) the liberty to shift their perception, and the freedom to change their physical and humanist points of view. Thus, the more life that I live, the more I experience and learn, so too these things change my perspectives. I like this play on the words "perspective" and "point of view", and during the research process have found myself moving freely between the two, often using one to reinforce the expression of the other.

### **Methodology**

My methodology has been surprisingly heuristic which is a fairly radical departure from my preferred method of research being firmly rooted in the Scientific Method: propose - design



- research - draw and finally build, in order to test a research concept or idea<sup>14</sup>. This streak of *Scientific Rationalism* is evident in my previous artworks and continues to create tension within my art practice. However, over the course of this research I have come to realise this divergent approach reflects the parts of me; my differing 'persona-fied' points of view. That is, some personas tend towards the subjective whilst others lean towards the objective, and some personas such as the Engineer and the Artist are in inherent conflict over explicit fact versus tacit knowledge. A clear example of this inner conflict within my character manifests through my Scientist and Engineer favouring scientific cognitivism versus the Artist within me surrendering to sensorial experience.

It became clear that the project would become a personal record of my own views and understanding of RIB, affording a rare opportunity to follow and document a single viewer's changing perspectives of a single site over time. Image 10 shows a typical diary entry, with records and observations based in each of my personas.

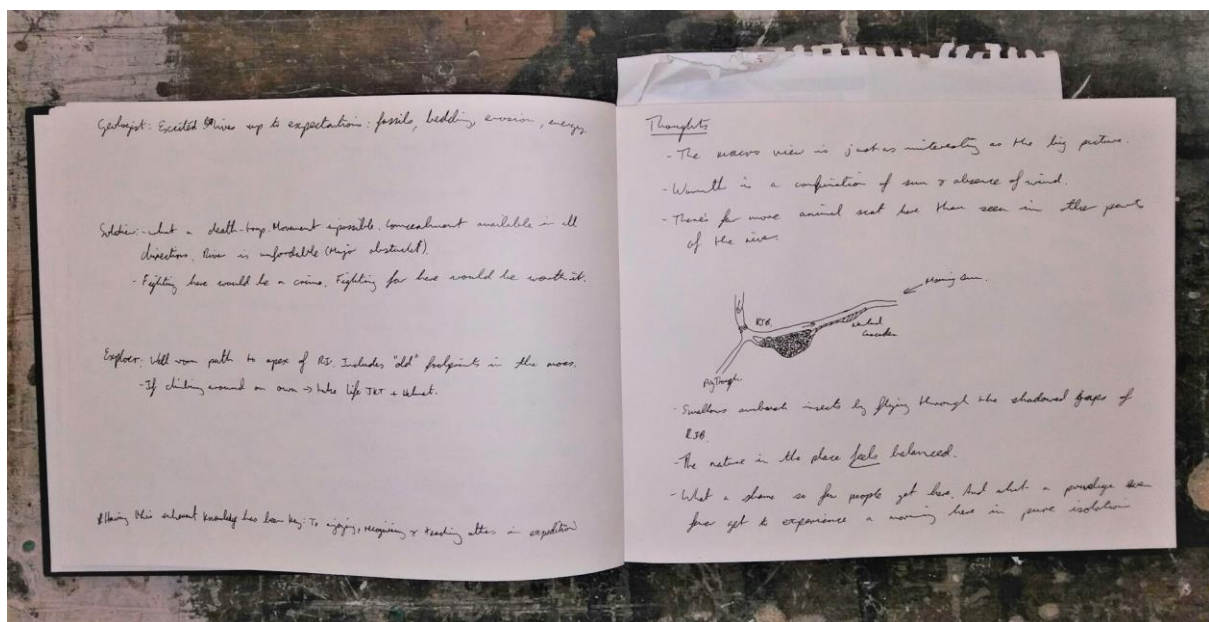


Image 10 – Visual diary entry, with observations and records within personas. (2015)

<sup>14</sup> The scientific method is defined as an empirical approach to test a hypothesis in support of a theory. The outcome is evidenced-based without subjective influence. The basic process is to make an observation, propose a hypothesis about the mechanism of the observation, test the hypothesis in repeatable experimentation, and then analyse in order to accept or reject the proposed hypothesis (Bradford, 2013)

I've allowed my choice of materials and methodologies to be informed by my various personas. The choices of writing, photography, action, *PowerPoint* illustration, talc overlays and pastel works are the methodologies that I have learned and employed over the various stages of my life and continue to use according to my context. The resulting choice of divergent materials are a direct reflection of my diverse perspectives.

Thus I found that at each of the four stages (*Anticipation and Expectation, Experience, Memory and Communication*) my methods were selected by the persona through which I was thinking and viewing and this approach enabled me to follow the methods aligned to each. For example, to utilise military graphical techniques whilst thinking as an Army Officer, or using geological symbology to represent what I saw of the site in the image whilst thinking and viewing in my geologist persona. Therefore, the vast majority of works were consequently experimental (and hence somewhat unresolved), or repetitive tests of basic concepts, or maquettes of proposed large-scale concepts and thought experiments.

During the research I found little or no reason to exhibit the experiments themselves; whilst being tests of artistic ideas and choices, the speculative artworks produced were significant as part of an iterative exploration. When these experiments were taken out of context with the other works or research project, they were commonly misinterpreted.

The sum of the practical component of the research project manifest as the final exhibition; the culmination of all the *unresolved* experiments as one collection. Upon reflection this made a great deal of sense in terms of the 'me' construct that created the works themselves... since I am the sum of my personas, so too the artworks are only a valid reflection of me when seen collectively. In effect, just as I am only able to be seen as a *complete* human being, the artworks are together the *complete* representation. The project then embraces the concept of an objective sampling as opposed to a subjective, hierarchical selection, as a reflection not only of my personas, but as an authentic method of unfiltered and open display.

### **Rationale for the Methodological Approach**

At the core of this research project, echoing my *persona process*, is Immanuel Kant's discussion of aesthetic experience and the idea that a viewer brings their lives and experiences to any aesthetic experience (Ginsberg 2013, and Rholfe 2016). With this in mind I undertook a methodological approach by applying Simus's (2009) concept of Scientific Cognitivism to my holistic perspective, and hence, broke down my comprehension and documented what I see simultaneously with each of my personas.

Once my personas were isolated and named, I could then adopt them over and over again to determine what was at the site, during the expedition to experience the site, and then afterwards to remember and process the memories.

However, this mode of rationalism only extended as far as dissecting and identifying my personas. From there, my methods to try and express my personas' understanding are as varied and emotionally influenced as any human decision may be. I had the freedom within my personas to express their points of view as I wished. For example, as a Soldier I expressed what I saw through digital maps and military symbology, as a Romantic, I expressed myself through writing and photography, as an artist, I used my sketch book and so on.

An additional benefit of this approach to separating and labelling my composite personas, is that it took less courage to dissect and reveal myself methodically, than it would had I allowed too much emotion to drive my decisions. This realisation formed a key point in my research in that it gave me the freedom to turn the selection of the final works for exhibition over to a sampling mode as opposed to a process base on judgement and taste.

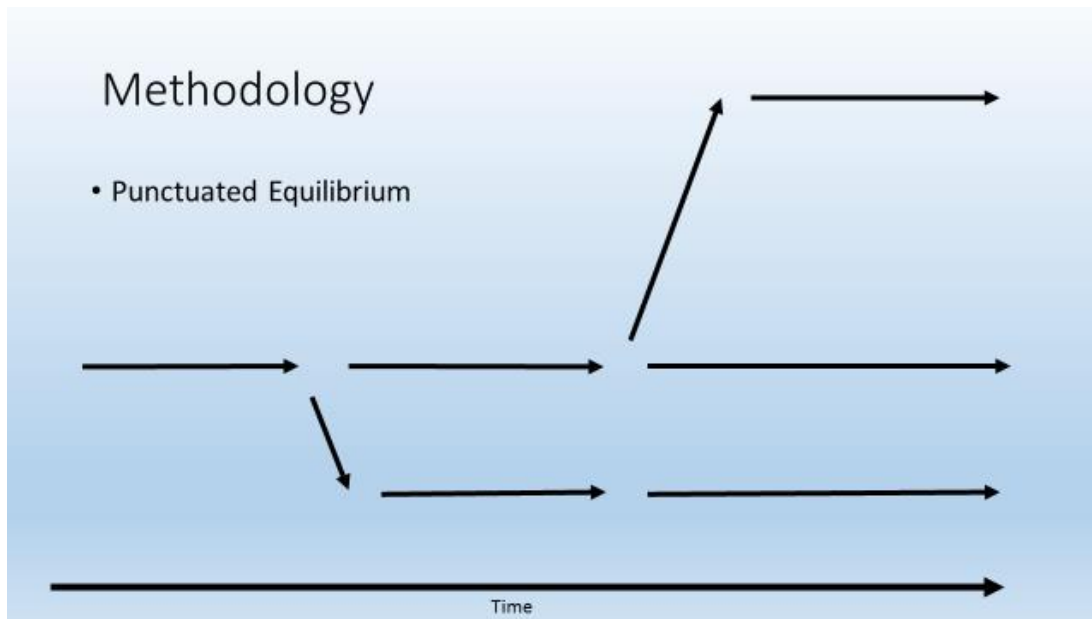


Figure 2. Punctuated Equilibrium

### The Punctuated Equilibrium Research Process

In the field of Palaeontology there are a number of theories on how and at what rate evolution occurs. Scientists speak of consistent rates of change, of evolutionary pressures, or the laws of ecology and population dynamics. One of these terms is key to my research process: *Punctuated Equilibrium*<sup>15</sup>.

*Punctuated Equilibrium* is the theory that a species goes along steadily existing (in stasis) with few physiological changes for many millennia or longer. Suddenly a radical mutation occurs (a punctuation) providing a marked advantage to that species' genetic survival, fundamentally changing the species. When this happens in a discrete geographical niche or sufficiently sized population, a new species may be born. This new species then settles down to a steady state again, until yet another combination of mutation and environment causes a rapid physiological change at the species level. Those lines of evolution that fail to change, eventually die out. By this means, the process shifts the projected outcome at each

<sup>15</sup> Steven Gould proposed *Punctuated Equilibrium* as an alternative to phylogenetic gradualism – that is, gradual and constant rates of change in evolution, in the 1970s (Gould, 1982). The key point, relevant to my methodology, is that the punctuated changes occur at irregular times and driven by external influences due to changes in the environmental niche, in this case, new-found information or physical limitations to the scope of research.

change, but the overall result is a series of discrete steps towards a more effective and relevant outcome.

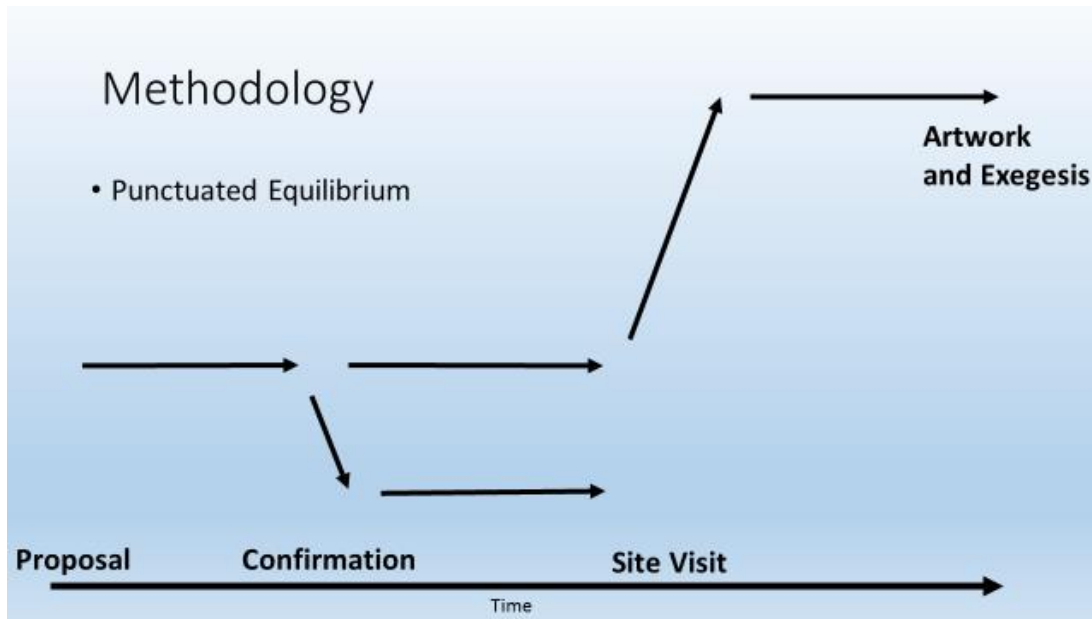


Figure 3. Re-aligned outcomes

My knowledge of *Punctuated Equilibrium* is born from my past persona, when in my twenties I worked as an ecologist, and palaeontologist in particular. *Punctuated Equilibrium* determines who I am, and how I see the world and it is how I describe the journey of this research project: a series of steady states, punctuated by key mutations. Some of the research lines die out and fail to survive, but eventually the scientifically rational approach delivers an outcome which is based upon selection of the successful methods and discarding the failures. These are the points of punctuation, of change and breakdown – these become the phases and outputs of the research journey. Some perspectives die out, some become whole new lines of artworks, but together they form a coherent narrative.

### Site Selection

I first encountered RIB through my wife<sup>16</sup>. It was her love of Peter Dombrovskis' images that first led me in 2006 to *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, and from my first encounter I was

<sup>16</sup> My wife, Samantha Hignett, was a skilled and talented Natural History artist and illustrator. I was first introduced to RIB when Sam was working on a series of prints about native Tasmanian flora and fauna, and the discussion turned to Tasmania's unique native deciduous beech, *Nothofagus Gunnii* and how Peter Dombrovskis' was capable of capturing the brilliant colours.

told the story of its utilisation in the Franklin-Gordon Dam protests. Thus I was informed of its reputedly iconic status amongst Tasmanian conservationists. This combination of a shared love of the photograph with my partner, and the connection with the founding of the Greens political party (Bonyhady 2004) led me to a recurring association with this specific Dombrovskis image once I moved to Tasmania in 2006.

The selection of RIB as a research site was based on the fact despite my recurring association with the image I had never visited the site. I therefore had an association with a site I had no personal knowledge of, or physical connection to. Thus the question was: how could I love a location that I only knew through the eyes of others?

### **Site Visit**

In early October 2015 I joined a commercial rafting company to raft down the Franklin River<sup>17</sup>, to RIB. On Day Five of the trip the crew and customers took a rest day at Newlands Cascades (about 400m downstream from RIB) and whilst the others rested I was able to move overland back up to RIB and spend approximately four hours exploring, writing, sketching and photographing the site. I was able to climb the rock, wade parts of the river, explore the walls, and most importantly, explore the areas outside Peter Dombrovskis' photographic frame, those parts of the site hidden from view outside the photograph (Image 11). It was in that four hour window that RIB went from a two dimensional image on a wall, to a multidimensional sensory and emotional experience.

Those four hours are now the source of my only direct connection to the site. For four hours I possessed the site – a singular moment of exquisite ownership, a chance for a haptic view. I felt an absolute delight in the freedom to move around the site... I was almost child-like in touching, exploring, climbing, and crawling. I was able to play in the stones, sit in the sun, and climb to the edge of the precipices. For four hours I clambered over every inch that I could access, I wrote, drew, photographed and played at stacking rocks and making my mark through ephemeral small sculptures. The place made me feel excited, comforted and a part of the entire system of processes that I saw around me.

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<sup>17</sup> With Tasmanian rafting company *Water By Nature*, between 05-12 October 2015



Image 11 – *Pig Trough Rapids, Rock Island Bend* (2015). Digital photograph of the view immediately to the read of Peter Dombrovskis image. Dimensions variable.

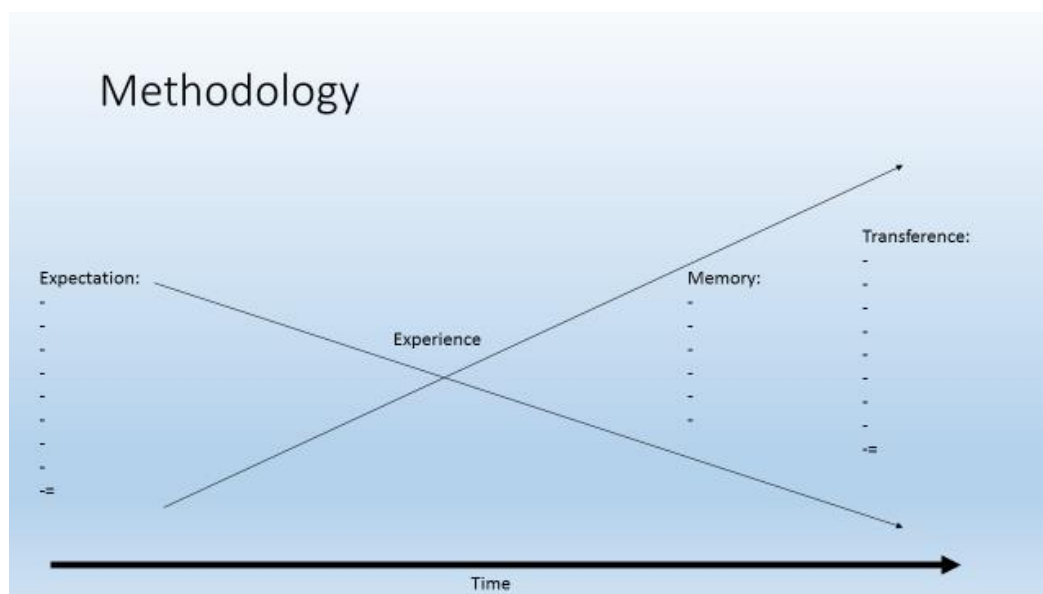
The four hours was simultaneously a release of my own personas, and a considered documentation of what I felt, saw, smelt and tasted. That short suite of moments, with the senses and observations documented, now defines my memory of the place. I will always know that for four hours in October 2015, it was just me and RIB that made the site story; a connection made for now and forever.

At the time I had thought I would be returning in March or April of 2016, going in on one rafting trip and spending up to five days at RIB, then being extracted by a follow-up rafting expedition. However, the 2016 summer of drought, fires, and then floods put an end to any return journey. The Franklin River levels that summer were some of the lowest on record, access was restricted by unprecedented large forest fires, and those few expeditions that did launch had no room for short-notice passengers. The situation caused me to pare down the project to a person's experience of a seminal moment in space and time, with the

singularity of experience now only existing (and will ever exist) as an embodied memory, photos and notes. In time I came to realise this was fortuitous, that the research was now clearly defined by a chronology of the journey: *Anticipation and Expectation, Experience, Memory and Communication*, filtered by my brief but powerful moment of encounter.

### **The Stages of the Journey**

Due to logistical and environmental circumstances the project has come to reflect a record of the four stages of the journey. The first stage of the journey documents my expectations and anticipation of the site, viewed through engaging with others who have communicated their experience of the site through writing, discussion and artworks (such as Peter Dombrovskis' *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*). The second stage describes my first-hand experience of the site in one brief moment in time and space. The third stage records and documents how I then viewed the site with the hindsight of memory – how I understood the site when not only having the inherited knowledge passed on by others in their art and writing, but now coupled with my own site experience. The fourth stage closes the loop, documenting how I would try to share my new understanding of this site by adding to the existing writing, records and image. This fourth stage entitled *Communication and Transference* is my attempt to communicate the essence and experience of RIB that is not self-evident in Peter Dombrovskis', *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*.



**Figure 4.** The Four Phases – Outcomes versus Time



## **Practical Considerations**

A series of prosaic factors resulted in methodological approaches and material decisions. The isolation and difficulty in getting to RIB meant that it took a nine day expedition in three rafts supported by four-wheel drives and a large motor yacht to get to and from the site just for a four hour window to experience RIB. This limited the selection of creative processes to undertake in situ to just photography, sketching and writing.

The alternate location for these studies was of course my Hobart studio space. However, the remoteness from the site, a lack of site-specific materials and restrictions of cost drove creative decisions about methods when undertaking the artistic experiments and studies. This range of methods varied between the use of written vignettes, the manipulation of photography, personal actions and recreations, acquiring third-party data such as satellite imagery and Hydro Tasmania rainfall statistics, and the creation of maquettes using artificial but available materials to conjure the site experience. Each of these methods reflect the diversity of experience; they are different and valuable in their own ways – the journey was about what was experienced and felt, not about applying a hierarchy of artistic approaches.

## **Methods Selected**

Vignettes. Surprisingly, of all the methods employed, the mode that seemed to best lend itself to adapt to my changing my personas was the written vignette. These vignettes enabled me to adapt a distinct attitude and persona from my own past and character, and write freely in a style and output reflective of that persona. The vignettes are small, discrete stories that operate in isolation and are consciously and deliberately written about the site in the persona they represent. The vignettes quite literally are written statements using RIB as the only point of continuity allowing me to use my various personas freely in as small a written space as possible, exemplifying what each persona ‘sees’ when thinking about or viewing RIB. The vignettes frequently became the catalyst for materials-based experiments. Not only were these texts outputs in their own right, but they also served to enhance my ability to adopt that persona and therefore clarify my various perspectives thereby enabling each persona to be clearly distinguishable from the others.

Sketch Book. Due to the variety of methods employed, in this series of research my sketch books became a record of my individual observations. My studio walls (Image 12) extended this paradigm and became in effect my visual diary which kept disparate ideas, methods and outcomes visible over time. It is worth noting that due to the practical considerations of my trip I also kept a brief visual diary during the expedition.



Image 12 – Studio walls (2015-17). Digital panoramic image.

Camera. Digital imagery as a recording medium and basis for experimentation was employed widely during the project. The intent was for my photographs to operate as a record of the event, not necessarily to become artworks in and of themselves. In this I was inspired by Gabriel Orozco's art practice, where the action or object is recorded by photography, not driven by photography (Bullosa, 2007). Of particular note was the flexibility digital imagery provided when it came to looking at and understanding the techniques Dombrovskis employed in his photography that I referenced for a series of experimental works that manifested as *Mass*, *Mist*, *Forest Vegetation* and *Flow*.



Image 13 – *Flow* (2015). Digital image. Dimensions variable.

These images were a method of experimentation; an attempt to try and either analyse specific traits of Peter Dombrovskis' image, or to recreate the emotional or sensory responses I feel when viewing his image.



Image 14 – *Mass Entrance* (2015). Digital image. Dimensions variable.

I also used the digital camera when recreating various physical perspectives of models and maquettes, and then recording varying perspectives. A few of the key images taken during the experiments were adopted directly and used as source material in the final works.

Image 14, *Mass Entrance* is an example of these photographic experiments and is one of several hundred experimental images captured in response to urban and rural sites where

the form of the image creates a sense of constriction or entrance, that implied a feeling of “falling” or “path” into a chasm, which I feel when viewing Peter Dombrovskis’ image.

Found Objects. A series of works were attempted (in my Romantic persona) in anticipating and experiencing RIB. The *Romance* series resulted in a series of written vignettes and utilised found objects that reflected the separation, labour and isolation of nineteenth century Piners in the South West of Tasmania.

The found objects were sourced from Tasmanian recycling centres and second-hand shops. I looked from forestry and colonial objects that were of the style and age to be used in farms and rural homes from the Victorian era. I attempted to create relationships with and between these objects, by treating them collectively and singularly I looked to the object for inherent stories and signs of human contact. I tried to base written works on the objects themselves, experimented in displaying the objects in the studio, gallery and rural contexts, I experimented with photographing the items in bush contexts. Ultimately, these works were not specific enough to RIB as a site, or were limited in what I felt to be their connection to the site, and proved to be yet another part of the research journey.

Acquired Data. A number of referenced raw data sources were procured, such as rainfall data, digital terrain mapping, geological mapping, and satellite imagery. These data sources<sup>18</sup> formed the basis of a series of works for corresponding personas. For example, my Scientist and Geologist could utilise the raw data from the Bureau of Meteorology to create artworks based directly of wind speed and direction figures, as seen in the *Wind* series (Image 15).

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<sup>18</sup> Data sources were publicly available sources online, available from Hydro Tasmania and such government websites as the Bureau of Meteorology. Most had automated daily records of physical information either directly from the Franklin River, or remotely via satellite feeds.

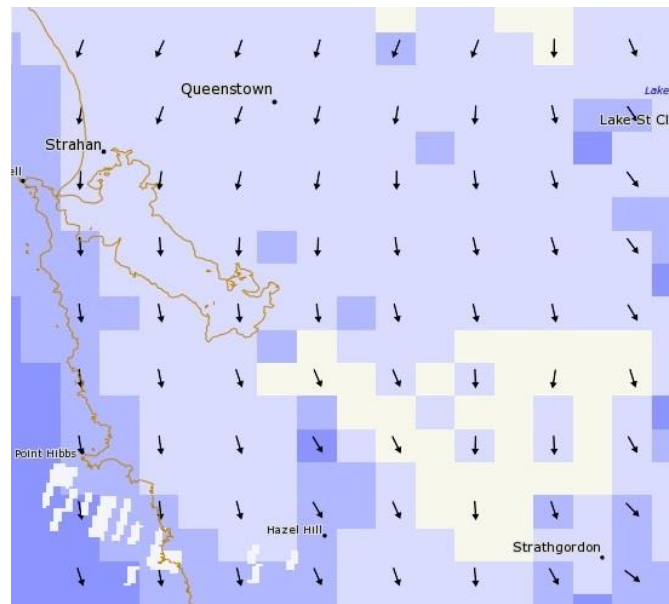


Image 15 – Wind (2015). Adjusted digital screen capture from Bureau of Meteorology, at <http://www.bom.gov.au/australia/meteye/>. Dimensions variable

The key observation I derived from this process was that the use of acquired data fits perfectly under the scientific cognitivism objective, and enhances enjoyment and appreciation of a view of a site by increasing the understanding of the processes seen in that site.

Mixed Media. A series of mixed media and classroom-based materials (that is, chalkboards and whiteboards etcetera) formed the basis of a series of experiments following the expedition when I was attempting to communicate ideas of memory and history relating to the site. The intention was to identify a method based upon the literal meaning of education and pedagogical learning: the classroom and teaching transfer of knowledge (in this case, the transfer or communication of a broader experience). I used the boards both as “classroom” lessons, and as if I was a 1920’s academic recording observations in the field on a slate or chalk board. These methods became transitory due to their didactic nature, and were an important step towards later works.

Maquettes and Modelling. The project made frequent use of maquettes and modelling. These proved useful in all phases of the project from *Anticipation* through to *Communication*. This is primarily due to their practical considerations such as space and cost – the use of maquettes enabled me to build and trial far more experiments and series than

building in full-scale. Additionally, once built, maquettes gave freedom to vary the viewer's physical perspective. A series of maquettes and small-scale experiments in the *Flow* series, and later in *Surface* (Images 20 and 21), proved highly effective at isolating and identifying factors and choices relating to the scientific and geological persona lines of enquiry.

In particular, maquettes and models proved ideal in the *Anticipation and Expectation* phase as they enabled me to literally build what I expected to see, and move through and around and beyond the frame of Peter Dombrovskis' image.

I acquired and purchased external data sets<sup>19</sup> to undertake digital modelling and build 3D virtual Terrain Models, however as they remained inside the frame of the laptop screen, I eventually abandoned their use in preference for physical maquettes as the hand-made, physical items provided a presence and materiality in the studio that digital models lack. Whilst the digital models provided a variety of rendered surfaces, and were useful for large-scale modelling, the physical models brought to the experiments a freedom and unpredictable nature that I found more beneficial than the tightly constrained, designed, digital constructs.

In combination these devices served to frame both the anticipation and the memory of encounter. As a stage beyond imagining or drawing they brought my awareness closer to authentic 3D modes of engagement in that they provided an intimate and immediate feedback to my imagined view of the site: I could summon an imagined view of the site from a distant (and inaccessible) hill, and then with a few mouse-clicks I could create a virtual 3D digital representational view. All without ever having been to the site.

### **Lines of Inquiry**

Over the course of the research, numerous lines of enquiry did not result in artworks or significant outcomes, however they were an important part of the research journey as investigations and inquiries within an iterative learning process. These speculative

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<sup>19</sup> All 3D data sets and modelling were sourced from the *Google Earth* series of tools at [www.google.com.au/earth/](http://www.google.com.au/earth/). However, I was able to purchase additional digital mapping from Land Information Services Tasmania (LIST) that could be digitally draped over the *Google Earth* terrain model.

investigations informed other developing lines of inquiry, enabling me to concentrate on those lines that showed promising results.

One line of inquiry included a series of interviews, as previously discussed. Whilst the responses were generally predictable, the interviews did provide a personal point of comparison; I could experience their feedback and how they felt about RIB; their distaste or affection for the site was tangible and provided information for personal reflection of my emotional response to the site.

In an entirely practical sense, approximately a third to one half of all my research experiments or lines of enquiry did not result directly in artworks, however, other intangible benefits did emerge from the research journey. To a greater or lesser extent the experimentation aided my understanding, and enabled me to acquire technical skills.

Interestingly, many of the confronting lines of enquiry seem to come from the parts of me that are more linked to emotion than analysis; experiments that were created as a result of my response or wandering, rather than control and experimentation. Through undertaking this project I have come to realise each of these lines of enquiry, undertaken within a heuristic trial-and-error learning approach, are worth pursuing.

### **Building a Comprehensive Body of Work**

One of the recurring challenges has been to bring these disparate methods, materials, and techniques into a comprehensive and holistic expression that ensures a sense of the RIB site remains foremost in the audience's perception in the final series and exhibition.

Consequently, a number of recurring themes and devices have been consciously adopted. An analysis of Peter Dombrovskis' photograph revealed a total of 20 formalistic visual lines, with seven major sight lines (see images 16 and 17). These seven lines define the proportions, depth and passage of the eye over the resulting artworks. This in turn affects the relationship of the artworks and experiments freeing the viewer to focus on the content rather than formal qualities.

The layout and association of specific works to each other in the selection of the final exhibition has been a key point of consideration. There has been a deliberate avoidance of a

museum-like rational chronology, instead a layout based upon the perspectives and building an overarching understanding of the site has been adopted. The layout of the final exhibition is then intended to reflect a network of tributaries that echo the flow through, to and beyond the collective experience of RIB.

### **Summary**

The project methodologies are a direct reflection of the personas and the approaches each would employ. The research process and chronological journey has been a reflection of my own conflicting objective and subjective approaches to my life. This has resulted in a punctuated research timeline of periods of quiet research, extended reflection/production and sudden moments of insight.

Overall the research has progressed through the four distinct phases: the period of *Expectation and Anticipation* where I viewed the site through Dombrovskis image, and tried to form an understanding and predict what I would see on the site; the site visit *Experience* itself, and how this reality varied from my anticipations; how my understanding changed when looking back with *Memory*, the fusing together of my understanding gleaned from Peter Dombrovskis artwork with my own experiences on the site but beyond his frame; and the final stage of *Communication and Transference*, where I take the discrete understandings and experiences and reassemble them for a renewed experience.

The Results chapter addresses these outcomes and my findings.



## **RESULTS**

### **Introduction**

This chapter includes a description, in chronological order, of the *Anticipation and Expectation, Experience, Memory and Transference, and Communication* 'phases'. In addition, I will outline the broad encounters and experiences that have informed the experiences, artworks and subsequent outcomes.

### **ANTICIPATION AND EXPECTATION**

*"Anticipation is also a to and fro movement in which expectations undergo inevitable revision in light of expectations that are unmet or are realized differently."*

Richard Coyne

(Coyne, 2016)

Of all the phases of research, it was during this first period I was entirely free to speculate on what I would experience at the RIB site beyond simply what I had seen and absorbed by viewing Peter Dombrovskis' image. This speculation was a joyful, and in a way, boundless, activity. I was free to create, analyse, predict and react to what I saw regardless of the confines of fact, memory or rationalising. In particular, I was free to wonder what might exist outside the bounds of Peter Dombrovskis' image frame.

On first encountering Peter Dombrovskis' RIB image I was struck by what was concealed rather than what is captured in the image itself. The mists, forests, light and water each mask the toughness and essence of aeons of time that must have passed in order to shape that rock island chasm. I felt humbled by the anthropomorphic symbology of the immovable rock worn by the stream of time. From viewing the image, I expected on my first site visit to experience a cold, slippery rock, devoid of light and warmth; a place covered by botany and crisp mountain water.

During this preliminary speculative phase I spent hours and days in a state of introspection, trying to understand the diverse personas within me; the parts of my life and character that define how I see and experience the world around me. These Soldier, Scientist, Engineer, Romantic, Historian and Firefighter personas collectively form a vast proportion of my character and are never truly latent, as I can't help but see the world through their eyes. However, what does vary, is the persona that is dominant within me at any one moment. Each of the personas, or a combination thereof, came to the fore at different stages of the project, however it was during this 'results' phase that I achieved significant steps towards understanding the diverse parts of me; the experiences and learned traits that have made me who I am.

This research project provoked me to acknowledge the way I view the world is a function of who I am, that what I see is framed by the lens I apply to see the world. I also learned that I have an inherent perception bias driven by my personas, and this realisation set me on an inquiry to try to come to terms with what I actually perceive in my mind, rather than simply passively absorbing the visual facts of the world around me.

During this phase I allowed myself to follow a broad range of media and method as a means of generating expression or gesture that would enable me to intuitively follow how my personas would work or operate. In the section that follows, I have outlined the works that led to progressing my multi-faceted understanding of the site, and in addition, how perceiving the site through viewing Dombrovskis' *Rock Island Bend* image shaped my site expectations and understanding.

### **Angles**

*"It is possible that, through horizontal and vertical lines constructed with awareness, but not with calculation, led by high intuition, and brought to harmony and rhythm, these basic forms of beauty, supplemented if necessary by other direct lines or curves, can become a work of art, as strong as it is true."*

- Piet Mondrian

(Mondrian, n.d.)

*Angles* was my initial attempt to connect with and understand Peter Dombrovskis' image; the first step in seeking to comprehend the site remotely, prior to connecting physically with RIB as a place; experiencing it as more than just an 'academic' location reference. Peter Dombrovskis' image is a version of the site, one individual's framing of the site presented and disseminated in the public domain. *Angles* engaged with the image, not the site, as the image angles themselves revealed geological bedding, relative spacing of the island, and slope as depicted in the photograph. *Angles* provided my first insights and calibrated my earliest expectations of what I thought I might encounter at RIB.

*Angles* was also an attempt to view the artwork through my Artist persona; to analyse the formal composition of the image in order to gain an appreciation of the drama and emotive qualities, then reflect on how this influenced my expectations of the site itself. This was an important *visualising* of my imminent encounter undertaken with the knowledge that later in the investigation I would test these expectations against the actual experience of being at the site.

*Angles* was manifested through mapping the dominant sight lines that described the way my eyes moved over the image, and in turn, how these lines both delineated connections, borders, and potentially defined depth. Whilst responding to the photograph's composition, these linear features, their length, the selection of the network, the weight and formal markings, were entirely subjective. After numerous experiments in drawing, tracing and projecting I settled on a selection of seven lines (from twenty), which formed a linear representation of the formal aspects of Peter Dombrovskis' image. However, they also morphed into a representation of the essence, the solidity, intersection, harshness, impact and tension, of the RIB site itself:

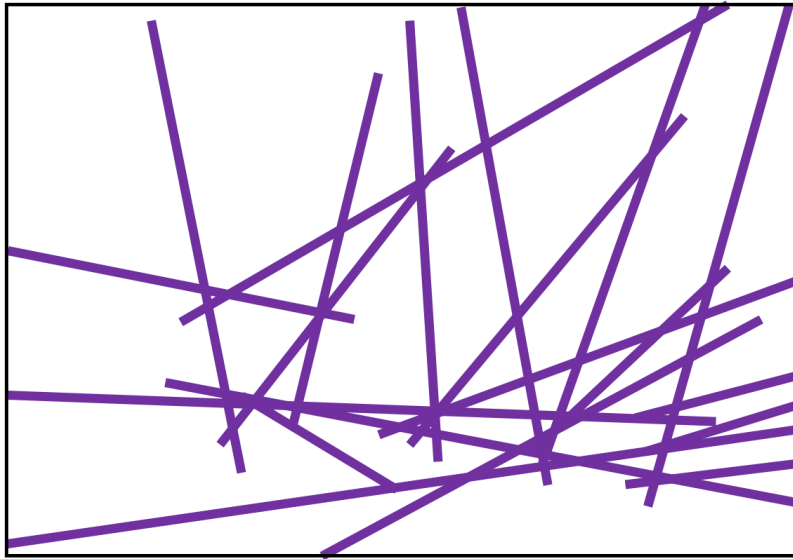


Image 16 – *Angles 20* (2015). Drawn digital image. Dimensions variable.

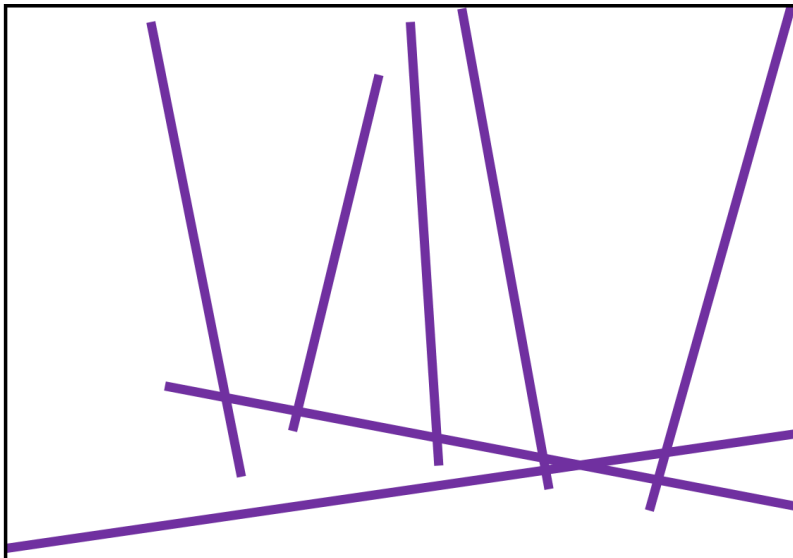


Image 17 – *Angles 7* (2015). Drawn digital image. Dimensions variable

Upon reflection, the linear features of *Angles* became a key recurring motif throughout the two years of research; a graphical trope that provided visual connections between analytical works of hugely disparate style and content<sup>20</sup>. In a number of these other works, driven and determined by diverse personas, the linear features of the *Angles* series remained a

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<sup>20</sup> It is worth noting I returned to *Angles* in the final stages of my studio experiments, particularly the digital and analytical works.

constant. At times they manifested as boundaries, or, alternatively, as surfaces connecting the homogeneity of the bedding planes.

### **Colour Analysis**

My various viewing personas inspired diverse lines of enquiry that encompassed the formal, the physical and the psychological. Merging me as an Artist, with the various relatively analytical mindsets, I began to examine the site's colour values and how the site could be represented as digital code. I took Peter Dombrovskis' image in the TIF format provided by the National Gallery of Australia and applied a digital grid by setting pixel dimensions based on the image dimensions. Each box then became a merged colour value (in *Hypertext Message Language* code), in effect, each box became a larger pixel where the resulting colour maps the digital average of all the constituent pixels within that box.

In doing this I was attempting to see if the perception and structure of the sites was recognisable when rendered through what is effectively another form of visual language. The result was a new experience of the site through diverse modes of visual encounter and language. I was able to shift from figuration/recognition to abstraction and back again. The realisation though, was that the return from the dissected abstraction was in a different visual language – a digital language of HTML code.

What began as a half-hour speculative exercise morphed into an obsession of sorts, when I realised the form of the image itself could be read as a series of boxes of code numbers in HTML text. In dissecting and then reinterpreting Dombrovskis' image into an entirely new form of representation I had developed a new mode of encounter and representation aligned to RIB.

These works, *Colour Analysis-1* and *Colour Analysis-2* demonstrated that in effect, these pictures types convey identical form and content, however they embody different languages.



Image 18 - *Colour Analysis-1 (2015)*, pixelated digital image based upon Peter Dombrovskis' *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*. Dimensions variable.

#878985	#455852	#455852	#D1CCC9	#D1CCC9	#D1CCC9	#C8CCCD	#BFC7CA	#B9BEC4	#B4BCBF	#B2B9BF	#ACB5BA	#ACB4B9	#778681	#B9BEC4
#263437	#314544	#475953	#B2AFA8	#CFCBC8	#C2C6C9	#BABFC3	#ADB5B8	#A5ADB0	#A1A9AC	#94A2A3	#889A9C	#7A8C8C	#384B49	#384B49
#293438	#2A393E	#38474A	#848683	#CDCCCA	#BFC2C7	#B3B6BD	#828B8A	#5D6D6A	#5D6D6A	#728484	#576A67	#576A67	#3F5650	#3B4C46
#6D7977	#253238	#2C3B40	#384A4A	#919793	#82B5BA	#8C9292	#4B5959	#425655	#425655	#4F6362	#4C6260	#39544D	#334E47	#415048
#273236	#26353A	#2A3C3C	#2E4042	#5C6962	#979B9A	#5F6865	#4E5A5A	#374A4E	#354D4D	#3D5555	#314F4D	#34524A	#2C4A40	#455451
#3C4848	#28373C	#28373C	#2C3E40	#4E5F59	#3B4D4D	#3B4E4C	#44535A	#3B4F56	#405556	#405653	#2F4E49	#2C4B45	#25403B	#394C48
#4F5855	#4C5655	#374546	#354447	#747E7D	#4C5C5B	#23383D	#243B41	#3E525B	#44565A	#405858	#354F4C	#354F4C	#2E4344	#334547
#333D3C	#414C46	#324040	#313F3F	#8C918D	#4B595A	#273C41	#273B42	#364A53	#2E454D	#3A4F54	#4C5E60	#384D50	#314546	#2F3D3D
#2B3335	#2E383A	#384140	#2E3C3D	#868A8D	#5E6A6A	#445356	#3A4C50	#3D5158	#384C53	#44575D	#59686F	#384C4D	#444E4D	#2F3D3D
#232425	#2A3235	#2A3338	#334247	#515F60	#546263	#5F6E71	#55676B	#697A81	#6F8087	#607178	#607379	#526366	#3A4A4A	#2F3D3D
#232425	#1E252B	#7F8E93	#3A4E55	#7C8688	#7C8688	#97A0A5	#869497	#758489	#5E6D72	#4F6268	#3E565A	#395257	#354E53	#2C4349
#2A424C	#324A54	#42595F	#7F8E93	#7F8E93	#A8AFB7	#A8AFB7	#68777A	#5F6E73	#5F6E75	#57666B	#3C4B50	#445658	#5F7173	#4B5D5F

Image 19 - *Colour Analysis-2 (2015)*, HTML code image based upon Peter Dombrovskis' *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*. Dimensions variable.

I was astounded to realise I could actually read the repeating and relatable text-based codes. This enabled me to realise that in order to communicate between the image (or artwork) and the viewer, then whilst the form in which the image is presented is important, also significant is that the artist and the viewer share a common language (for example, colour, tone or even text-based). Whilst this in itself did not alter my understanding or anticipation of the site, it did however reveal a far wider degree of visual options to explore. This experience, and the subsequent understanding, stayed with me when I encountered

the actual site and motivated me to explore the site with a wide selection of approaches, methods and media<sup>21</sup>.

### **Point of View**

In the early days of the project it became apparent that in order to anticipate the relationships and spatial nature of the site I would need to attempt to translate the image into three dimensions and understand the spatial layout of each part of the image. Additionally, the actual depth of space depicted in the image, obscured due to the mist, and the fact *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* depicts a river bend, with suggestions of rock forms *beneath* the river's surface, around the corner and beyond Dombrovskis' frame, was something I needed to explore. As a consequence, I asked myself what kind of insights into the three dimensional layout of the site could I gain from Dombrovskis' image?

In response I manufactured a series of maquettes entitled *Point of View*. I began by using wire and cardboard models to attempt to accurately recreate the spatial relationships of the rock and landforms, and develop my engagement with, if not appreciation for, the atmospheric and dramatic nature of the image due to the scale, shape, surface, positioning and obscuration.



Image 20 – *Point of View* (2015). Maquette of plywood, wire, staples. 1x0.6m.

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<sup>21</sup> Additionally, I found the system of discovery, analysis and dissection triggered emotional experiences within me. These experiences drive and inspire me.

Through this process I discovered that with ratios and relationships, angles, depth and proportions, I could create a table-top model of the site. This layout, and its inherent spatial relationships, enabled me to consider what lay beyond the model surfaces as infinite possibilities. The areas of the site which I couldn't see in Dombrovskis' image, due to their being obscured by mists or terrain or existing outside of the image frame, were being concurrently brought to life through my studio maquette, and imagination, neither of which were limited by any physical or factual constraint.

Beyond the visible composition of *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, I was free to imagine any space or any form, where the only limits were those imposed by my *other* personas; that only I had placed limits on what may be there based upon my own knowledge, expectations, understanding of science, geology and terrain.

### **Surface**

A photographic image is coarsely a visual representation of surfaces and reflections, which contains a suite of visual clues as to materiality, structure, temperature, and moisture etcetera. However, whilst pictorial texture may suggest tactility, contingent on the visual content of the image, we can also make connections to sensations such as odours despite the fact that the image doesn't literally emit them. It is only in situ that these sensations can be experienced<sup>22</sup>.

Early in the project I began to use my scientific personas to identify what information I could glean from the image specifically related to RIB's soil composition and geology. In later phases of the project, after I had visited the site, this evolved into the chemical and subsequently the palaeontological, however initially I had the image of the strata bedding<sup>23</sup>, and hence could only make my analysis an artistic appreciation of what the surface may feel and appear to be like.

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<sup>22</sup> Whilst 'technologies' such as *scratch-and-sniff* images, and virtual reality exist, these are versions of the original source, and as such still stand apart from the visceral experience.

<sup>23</sup> See also the Geology results paragraphs.





Image 21 – *Surface* (2016) digital image of cardboard Maquette (0.7x0.4m). Dimensions variable.

This role playing, contemplation, then experimentation, collectively manifested a series of cardboard maquettes of the terrain informed by diverse physical and emotional perspectives. These maquettes did not substantially add to my understanding of the site (that I hadn't been able to achieve using wire mesh in the *Point Of View* series) except for one distinct point of difference; the model cardboard, at a macro-level, provided a wonderful visual metaphor for the actual rock surface. Inspired by this model/actual alignment I produced a series of digital images entitled *Surface* where I attempted to convey the forms of canyon and cliffs that I anticipated experiencing first hand during the future site visit. The cycle of relations triggered by analysing the image of the site (taken by someone else), then physically modelling the site in response to that image and investigating the geological elements, contributed to a collection of site expectations. This process also served to not only enhance my understanding of the forces, objects and materials of RIB, but also my appreciation and enjoyment of the site's aesthetic components and natural history context<sup>24</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> The results of these experiments were channelled, during the *Transfer and Communication* phase, into the choice of materials for the work-up maquettes and whilst testing the materials for the gallery installation *Angles* (2017).

## Geology

*“While the scientist sees everything that happens in one point of space, the poet feels everything that happens in one point of time.”*

Vladimir Nabokov, 1966

(In Moreau, 2005)

At the heart of my version of scientific rationalism lies the training I received as part of my Bachelor of Science degree. Twenty-five years ago I trained as a geologist for the petroleum industry, specialising in palaeontology. The part of me that is defined by this training and experience; these Scientist and Geologist personas, are an important influence on my process of analysing and recording what I saw when viewing Peter Dombrovskis’ *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*. I find his objective *Scientist* view to focus on processes that derive a certain satisfaction through understanding how diverse natural or artificial systems, work.

A series of visual and vignettes, were informed by this scientific viewing within the *Anticipation* stage of the project. I found through my Geologist persona I could examine Dombrovskis’ image and see the bedding planes<sup>25</sup>, and the lay of the land; as a geologist I could read the hardness of the rock, the fault lines, the weaknesses and the joints through and with the image.

Through this process I first experienced how the segmenting of a site’s embedded knowledge can prompt and frame individual investigations, which can be reassembled to create a new understanding - a sum of knowledge that is greater than its parts<sup>26</sup>.

By viewing through my Geologist, understanding the strata and fault lines visible in the image, I could therefore predict the shape of the terrain and direction of the river that lay beyond the visible zone; those site areas outside the frame or hidden in the image by mist and landforms. I also came to realise there is a significant difference between experiencing a site through an artwork, as opposed to employing *open* imagination, educated guessing, and the objective empirical analysis that frames and informs empirical facts.

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<sup>25</sup> Bedding planes are the layers of sediment in sedimentary rock. Each layer is progressively younger than the layer below, and is usually homogenous in character and materials.

<sup>26</sup> See also Scientific Cognitivism.

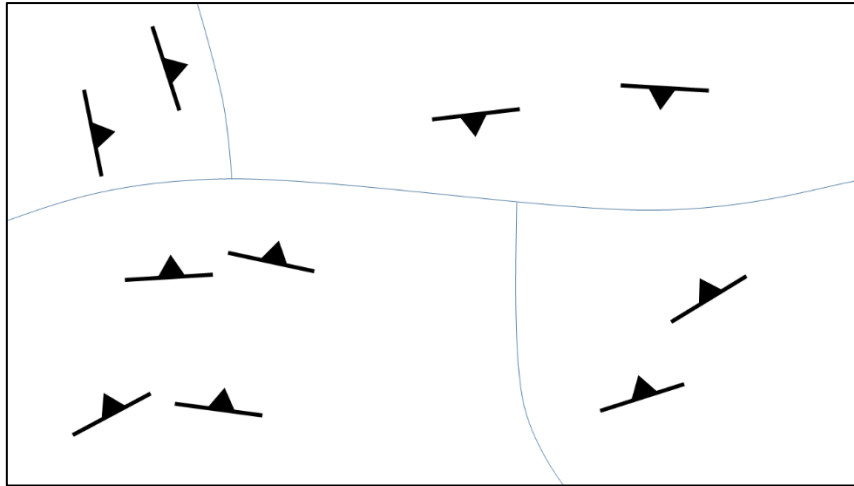


Image 22 - *Dip and Strike* (2016). Digital drawing. Dimensions variable.

As a Geologist I produced a series of images based upon classical geology including the fault lines (*Fault Lines*), and the symbology of the bedding strata (*Dip and Strike* and *Geology*). Additionally, I returned to a rationalistic and analytical text and written vignettes, in order to express and document my reaction to the site based upon viewing Peter Dombrovskis' image.

### **Intangibles**

Not all of my personas are defined by my prior training or experiences aligned with analytical or rationalist traits. I also carry within me relatively emotional personas and characteristics, such as my romantic view of life, and my emotive side and belief in the conservation and preservation of wildness<sup>27</sup>. These at times intangible traits also influence the way I view my world and inspired me to tap into these personas, making conscious efforts to view, and react, to Dombrovskis' image whilst immersed in these arguably non-rational personas.

Working with these emotive and subjective personas, I found it more difficult to create reflective works, or record how I was viewing the site. These emotional understandings do not come with a rational language nor the easy visual symbology that I had adopted for the rational analysis of colour or the force vectors of flowing water. My life as a Soldier, Scientist and Engineer has not provided me with the training to easily express emotion through visual

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<sup>27</sup> Not "wilderness". Wildness is about freedom and balance in nature in the presence of humans, and the other focuses on the absence of humans and their influences (Monbiot, 2013).

and sculptural means. And so I began reflecting on and writing about these intangible emotive views; an act which proved to be incredibly liberating. By writing short vignettes I could succinctly communicate my reactions, my feelings whilst immersed in the image. I could also record in the written word what I saw in the image, however I was not bound by the limitations of fact, science or the laws of physics. At times I employed a reductionist approach, where the brevity of my responses were core to the passages of writing. It was this use of text that enable me to directly translate to the viewer the character and quality of the persona.

The following emotions-based and non-rationalist lines of research proved to be the most productive:

### **Romance**

The formal qualities of the mist, the anthropomorphic, immovable island resisting the stream, the pristine, virginal yet fecund nature depicted in Peter Dombrovskis' image combine to make it a distinctly romantic and emotive scene.

Through the lens of my Romantic persona, my visceral reaction to the image was that of separation, trials and hardship; I reflected on the romance of struggle associated with feeding and clothing an absent family through the hard work of forestry and construction whilst isolated in a wilderness. I initially tried to express this through the use of found forestry objects such as axes, adzes, lamps and colonial-era artefacts such as photographs and love-tokens.

The objects themselves have an inherent and residual narrative evident in the markings on worn handles, chipped edges, rust, stains and damage. Each of these traces suggest an event or story. However, I found that without resorting to clichéd romantic symbolism the stories were illustrative of rural and pioneer lives, but not necessarily romantic. I found that I could not personally connect my own soul or spirit with a stranger's found tools and items when they are taken out of context. Without knowing the found objects original context or having a personal connection with the item, to me the romance was lost. That romantic narrative did not seem to be present within these dislocated items, and in the final analysis, instead of using the found objects, I ended up returning to the written word and instead wrote of the absence, loss and heartbreak I could intuitively see and imagine at the site.

## **History**

*History* was a series of reflections developed in response to the isolations, dangers, discomfort of, and potential rewards for, the Piners; the Huon Pine forestry workers of the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In this body of work, I considered the horrors that the West coast wilderness must have represented to the convicts of Macquarie Harbour and Sarah Island in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the excitement and thrill of protestors challenging the Hydro Electric Commission, and the founding of the Greens Movement in Tasmania with the Franklin-Gordon Dam protest movement of the early 1980s.

These texts underwent a series of rewritings in order to distil what I saw or imagined of scenes across time when viewed through Dombrovskis' image. Initially, much of what I wrote was factual and relatively staid, however later iterations, framed by my emotive personas, freed my imagination to 'see' more each time I viewed and returned to the image. I found this to be a self-fulfilling process: one where each iteration of writing was built on the previous story, but joy was in the discovery that the iterative distance, the more and more I re-imagined the site, that despite a growing separation from the pragmatic view of the image content, the stories never lost any of their emotive content or power to engage with other viewers.

## **Fire**

I tend to look with rational/pragmatic eyes at the Australian landscape and its relationship to bushfires, despite the fact that 'fire' to most viewers elicits an emotive response. As a trained firefighter I cannot help but see topographical aspects, degrees of slope, fuel loadings, and indicators of humidity, soils, wind speeds and directions. When it came to putting on my viewing *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend* through my Firefighter persona, my reaction was almost instinctive: a fear of being at that site with an approaching fire front – as a Firefighter I recognised how the heat, the sense of entrapment and the potential pain of a bushfire. In this version of encountering the image all I 'see' is fear, horror, pain and noise.

Despite the relatively positive persona filters through which I could view the image that revealed beauty, history, challenge, purity etcetera, the firefighter filter that was fearful, cautious, watching the weather, and listening to the warnings, remained present. I

expressed this latent emotion in a written vignette *Fire* where I documented my reaction in a way that leaves no doubt that for at least a part of me, Peter Dombrovskis' *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*, is a place I dread.

### **Terrain and the Defence of Rock Island Bend**

The series of works that make up *Defence of Rock Island Bend* reflect one of the most dominant influences on my persona: my 27 years of military service. When I looked at *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*, and subsequently at maps and the terrain, the soldier in me could not help but see avenues of approach, how I would defend the site, and decide what the likely directions are from which an enemy threat would approach.

Observation, Cover and Concealment, Obstacles, Key Terrain, Weather, and Avenues of Approach... these are the steps that comprise the military process of *Terrain Analysis*, and once embedded in your mind they become a daily ritual that frames how you see the land, regardless of the environmental context. Whilst on walks, doing the shopping, or driving a car, when looking at a beautiful view or seeing news reports on the evening television, I can't help but see the 'terrain' through those six factors.

In response I produced a series of fictionalised assessments of the terrain, based on contemporary warlike operations and weapons capabilities. These mental exercises and experiments resulted in two series *Terrain* and *Defence of Rock Island Bend*. *Terrain* examined the rates of movement and analysis of the terrain in terms of decisions about *Key Military Terrain* and what became *Vital Ground* if I was to conduct military operations in the vicinity of RIB.

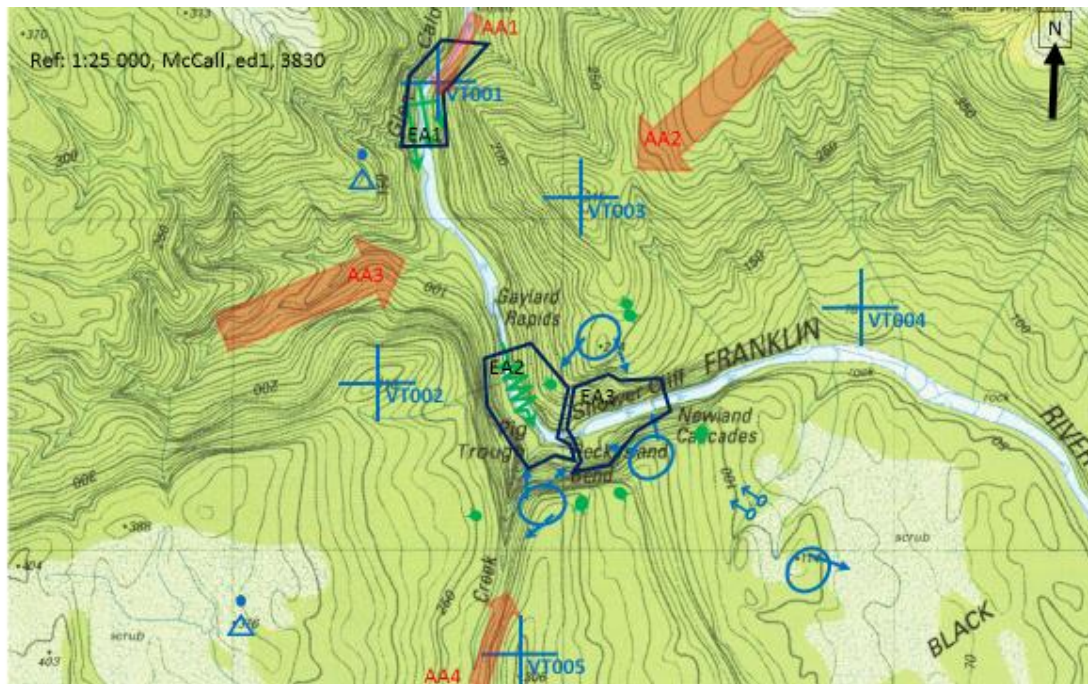


Image 23 – Defence of Rock Island Bend 1 (2016). Drawn digital image over terrain map. Dimensions variable.

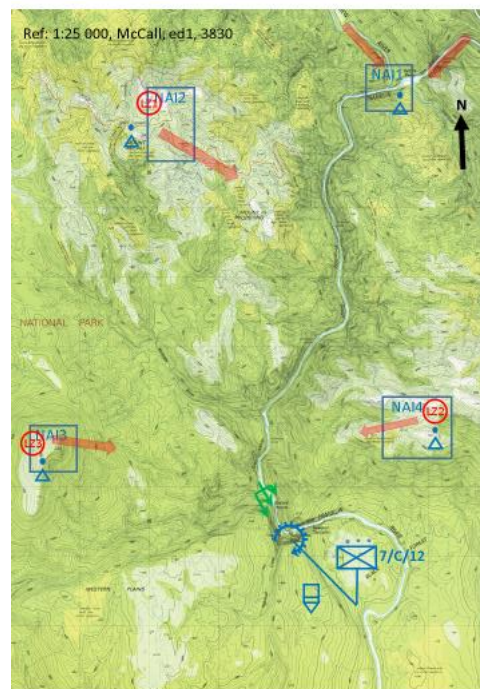


Image 24 – Defence of Rock Island Bend 2 (2016). Drawn digital image over terrain map. Dimensions variable.



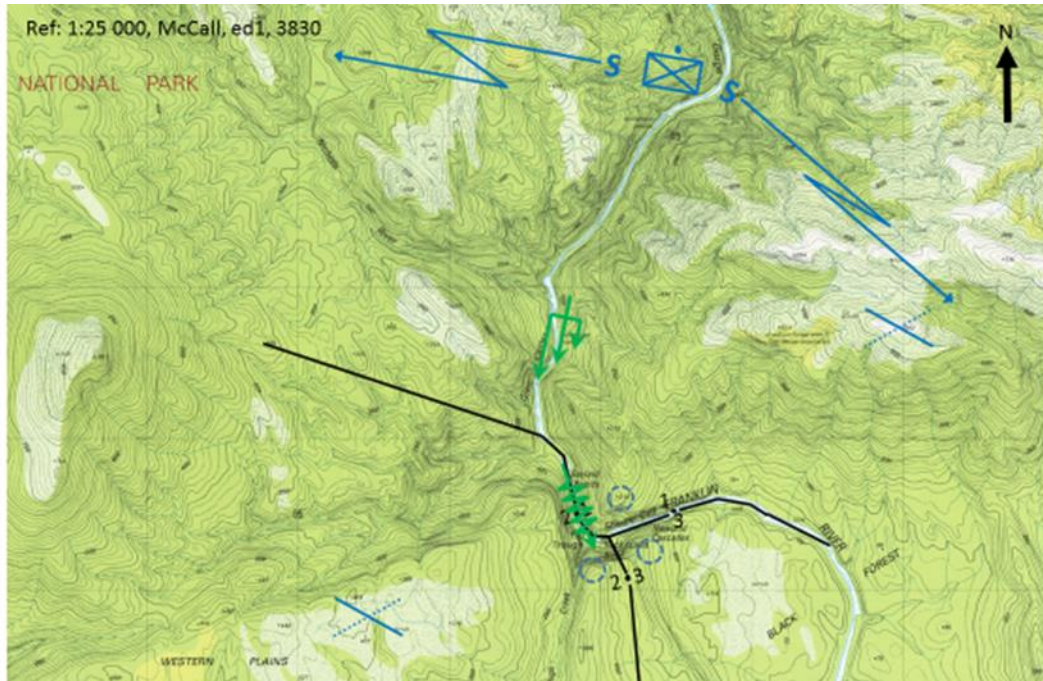


Image 25 – Defence of Rock Island Bend 3 (2016). Drawn digital image over terrain map. Dimensions variable.



Image 26 – Defence of Rock Island Bend 4 (2016). Drawn digital image over terrain map. Dimensions variable.



In the series *Defence of Rock Island Bend* I applied the process of *Terrain Analysis* and determined how I would physically fight to defend RIB. This literal analysis also referenced the legal and philosophical defence of the World Heritage Area, that is, the protection of RIB as part of the conservation movement. Despite this being a conceptual “what if?” exercise I found it disturbing how easily my mind would switch to the Soldier persona that could read into Dombrovskis’ image strategies for the controlled application of violence.

The *Defence of Rock Island Bend* series became the defining moment of this project as it made me realise how I encounter, view and interpret an artwork, image or an actual location, is unique to me: that others do not typically look out over a river valley or wooded terrain and see potential machinegun nests, they don’t see the speed at which a bushfire could spread, nor would many look at the rocks and understand the terrain is defined by the joints and folds of the underlying rock strata. It was this realisation that set the scene for the next phase: to compare what I saw in Dombrovskis’ *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend*, to what I would actually see, taste, touch, feel and understand when I eventually got to the site. Consequently, I began to question whether *experience* would add or detract from the months of *anticipation*...

## **EXPERIENCE**

*“The strong experience of nature... is the necessary basis for all conception of art on which rests the grandeur and beauty of all future work.”*

Paul Cezanne, 1904

(In Chipp, *et al*, 1968)

The ‘live’ experience of the RIB site was an altogether eye-opening moment. Gone was the mystery, the concealment of rock and darkness. Now, not only was RIB a place of light and warmth, but also sound and movement too. RIB immediately became a place of birds, crashing water, rolling clouds, and eventually even the chatter of fellow human visitors; a site in perpetual motion.

As discussed in the Methodology Chapter, the four-hour window in which I had to experience RIB became the point around which my research pivoted. The *Experience* is the

conduit between the Before and the After; the predictions based upon Dombrovskis' image in the *Anticipation and Expectation* phases, separated in time from the *Memory* of the expedition itself.



Image 27 – *Rock Island Bend – From the East* (2016). Digital photograph of the rear side of Rock Island Bend. Dimensions variable.



Image 28 – *Rock Island Bend – Nothofagus sp. Seedling* (2016). Digital photograph of small *Nothofagus* seedling, approx. 3-4cm high, growing in rock and moss on the rear slope of Rock Island. Dimensions variable.

The experience of the visit neither confirmed nor denied those early predictions, however it did add to my understanding of the site by revealing aspects of RIB that I had not seen nor expected based upon the filter of my personas. For example, I had not expected the fossils, the winds, the silent birds. I had not expected the macroscopic flowers, the insect life, and the spongy mosses, nor the worn footpath to the top of Rock Island. I did not anticipate the absence of animal life, nor the beauty of RIB immediately to the left and right of Dombrovskis' image framing.

During and after the visit, I suddenly found that not only had I accumulated a depth of knowledge from my previous analysis and predictions, but this had now combined with the multi-dimensional and sensorial inputs that come from experiencing a site corporeally.

### **Vectors**

My first experience of RIB was not as one might expect, based on sight, touch or the scientific composition of RIB, in fact, it was overtaken by the flow of the river. I had a limited appreciation of this 'flow' until I arrived at the site and realised RIB is in fact immediately downstream from the enormous Pig Trough Rapids that are located mere metres, just out of the left of frame, of Dombrovskis' image.

The rapids forced us to disembark from the river rafts, portage around and over the rapids and re-join the raft in the foreground of the image. In effect, due to cliff paths and physical effort, I had kept my head down, and was sensorially overwhelmed by the spray and noise of the rapids. And then there was that moment when we pushed the raft off from the wall, and began to float and spin in circles. It was as simple as that; my first sensory experience of the site was through this imbalance through floating and the motion of the raft on the river currents.

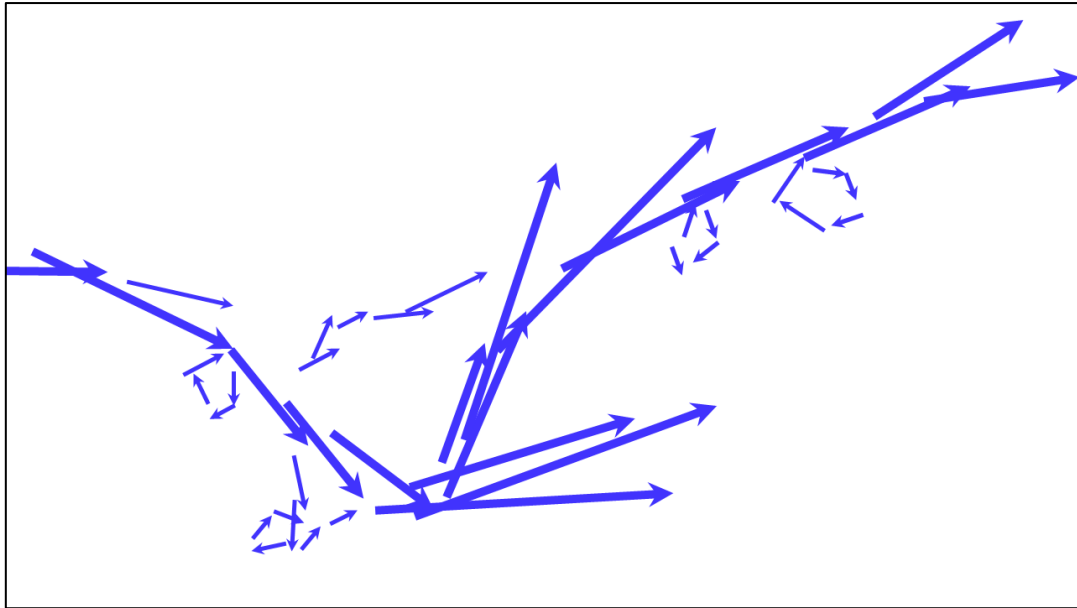


Image 29 - *Vector Analysis* (2016). Digital drawing. Dimensions variable.

Hence my first RIB experience was defined by the current flow of the river where the river treated us as a form of detritus; as mere passive, passengers floating in transitory rafts barely in control of our own journey. The force and direction of that flow<sup>28</sup>, framed the absolute truth of the *Experience* phase of my project; that any human influence on the site is allowed at the whim of natural forces, and that humans remain transitory and marginal in as compared to the scale of these forces. In other words, nature and environmental forces have to date done far more to define the site than we ever could.

### **Chemistry**

In contrast, with the *Chemistry* series, my experience of the site's chemistry, as compared to what I thought I'd see at RIB, was almost identical, which surprised me. My Geologist and Scientist personas were quite accurate in predicting what rock types and environmental factors I ended up encountering *in situ*.

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<sup>28</sup> Hence the selection of the title: *Vectors*.

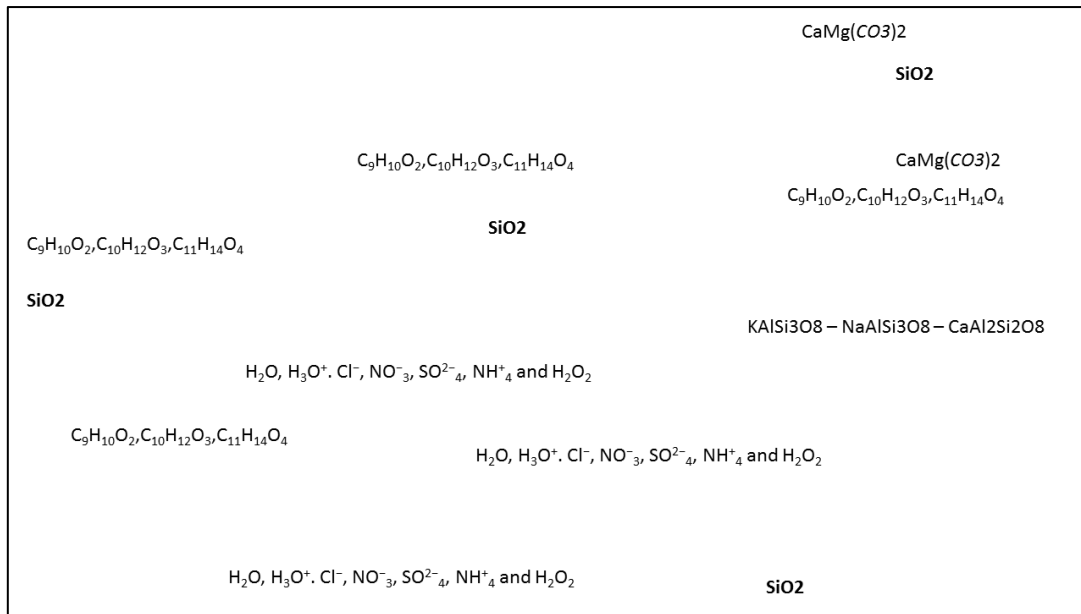


Image 30 - Chemistry (2015). Digital drawing. Dimensions variable.

This is reflective of the macro/micro aspect of the world we inhabit: The chemicals that we are made of, and the rocks, earth, water and even air, follow immutable rules unaffected by subjective desires or tendencies. Therefore, limestone bedrock always forms a grey, microscopic lattice structure and is susceptible to dissolution by water, and therefore limestone will always form similar colours and shapes. Sand is always made of silicon dioxide, the crystals bond at angles of 120 degrees, therefore quartz and sandstone blocks that we can see have their fractures and breaks at 120 degree angles. This predictability and order is at odds with the emotive response I feel when seeing the entire landforms, the complex combination of river, cliffs, forest and sky.

I felt that this accuracy of my expectations in this persona, was quite a success, a simple reinforcement of the basic truth that knowledge and experience can be informed and accurate.

### Palaeontology

The works and experience generated through the palaeontology of RIB is an excellent example of how experience can radically shape knowledge and perception of a site. Before visiting RIB in October 2015 I had no idea of the fossils that would be found in the rock strata and I certainly had no idea of their morphology or pervasiveness.

I was delighted upon visiting the site to discover a facies<sup>29</sup> of fossils that I had previously encountered over two decades ago: trace fossils and shallow marine facies. I found I was able to look at and touch the worn slabs of stone and tell the direction of sea currents had been flowing tens of millions of years ago. I could tell the beds had been deposited in waters less than 30 metres deep... that the site must have been close to mountains and that occasional floods occurred<sup>30</sup>.



Image 31 – *Fossilised Feeding Trails* (2015). Digital image. Dimensions variable.

This was an absolute delight for suddenly here was an entire part of my life, a persona I carry with me, that added to my RIB experience, which had not been made visible through the image itself. Here was proof that no matter how culturally iconic or historically important an artwork is, it can never transcend the personal encounter. The artwork enhances and interprets but does not monopolise, the sense of a place.

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<sup>29</sup> Facies: “the appearance and characteristics of a sedimentary deposit, especially as they reflect the conditions and environment of deposition and serve to distinguish the deposit from contiguous deposits”. (Dictionary.com 2017)

<sup>30</sup> The palaeontological knowledge was buried deep in my memory; that ripple marks in sedimentary sandstone have the steepest side downstream, where smaller wavelength ripple marks occur in shallower waters from wind-induced wave action, and the alternating bedding of fine and coarse sand and gravel represent alternating periods of calm water and floods.



## Wind

I was caught by surprise when experiencing RIB in situ, as the wind was also a defining feature of the site, the combination of the sound, and the movement upon my skin, affected me viscerally. Dombrovskis' image is profoundly still, the mists, along with the long exposure shutter speed create an atmosphere of silent strength, yet in reality the site was noisy, shifting and tenuous.

The noise came from the sounds of the rapids and waterfalls, just out of the picture frame, and via the channelling effect of the breeze funnelling through the narrow topography, meant at no time was RIB to me a silent place.

In stark contrast to all the noise of wind and water, the birds in close proximity to RIB were silent; no birdsongs, nor the sounds of wings. I noted over time spent at the site, the volume of those roaring sounds; the white noise of the rapids and winds, felt normalised and soon faded into the background of my subconscious.

## Mosaic

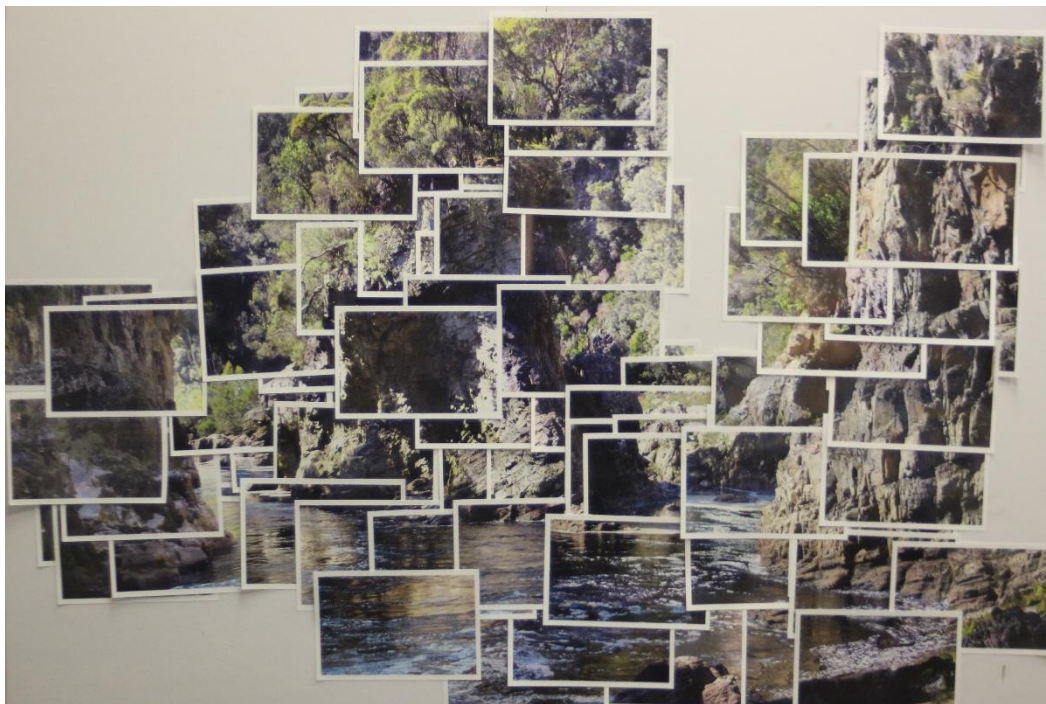


Image 32 – *Mosaic 1* (2016). Experimental montage of printed digital images. 1x0.77m.

At RIB I was able to triangulate from rocks and intersections down to within a centimetre or two, exactly where and at what height Peter Dombrovskis had set up his camera in order to

capture his iconic *Morning Mist, Rock Island Bend* image. It was at this moment that the idea for the *Mosaic 1* artwork formed; that here I was simultaneously looking at RIB in both a physical sense, as well as through my own humanist point of view. And then I realised a mosaic format is an ideal way to symbolise each of my different personas; each relating to a different part of the image, whilst collectively forming a coherent picture of great depth and beauty.

*Mosaic 1* is the literal embodiment of the whole being greater than the sum of the parts, where the images are individually isolated, or almost abstract, but collectively combine to form a coherent visual image. *Mosaic 1* will be developed into an installation (*Mosaic 2*) on a larger scale, for the submission exhibition, that will enable viewers to see through and around the constituent images in order to enhance the immersive impact.

*Mosaic 1* was a pleasure to make as I found the process logical, the insights gained decisive and unexpected, and the outcome itself evoked a spatial experience in an engaging manner. Additionally, the technical challenge to triangulate and determine Dombrovskis' actual camera position at RIB manifested as a personal moment of connection to and with the photographer that I so admire, but will never have the chance to meet.

### **Stone**

The work *Stone* is entirely fortuitous as I had no idea at the time of my visit to RIB that it would transpire to be my one-and-only experience<sup>31</sup>. Therefore, my actions at the site were driven by my desire to experience and document the visit, rather than to physically create and make ephemeral artworks on site.

Purely by chance I placed a single, ordinary rock from the site in my pocket as a piece of memorabilia. It was only months later that it became apparent I was not returning to RIB, and as a consequence I held only one, tactile item - that Rock Island pebble - through which to remember and reconnect to the site.

I love the notion that this single, insignificant rock embodies that seminal moment in my research... that the point between all those artworks, thoughts, and writings that came

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<sup>31</sup> See also "Site Visit" for an explanation of the expedition process and reasons for the cancellation of the second expedition.



before the expedition, and all the musing, creating and memories accumulated, are now both literally and symbolically represented by the single fulcrum of one tiny, isolated river stone.

In the gallery space, this RIB stone echoes Robert Smithson's *nonsite* artworks, where the viewer is provided a map and description of the site in diverse physical, cultural, etcetera forms, in addition to an item sourced from the site. However, for the 'Smithson' visitor who has not visited the original site, this information feeds their anticipation, conjuring up visions of how they imagine the site to be based upon evidence of the real site in the gallery space.

Out of context, and without the supporting documentation, the RIB stone is just a small white stone, however in the context of my research, and the journey I have been through over the last two years, it has become profoundly symbolic... pure white, milky quartz, crystalline, incredibly hard yet rounded by the action of the river. Natural. Pristine... The relationships to RIB and my experiences are wonderfully and mnemonically embodied in this small, and seemingly irrelevant, stone.

I chose to display the stone under bright light as a magical, valuable, almost royal object that references and in a way sums up the entire process of visiting RIB; the planning, fund raising, booking the travel, and rafting for days, all in order to have a few hours of isolation, followed by yet more days of rafting and travelling back to civilisation.

## **MEMORY**

*"Memory is a great artist. For every man and for every woman it makes the recollection of his or her life a work of art and an unfaithful record."*

Andre Maurois, 1929

(In Rubin 1988)

During *Memory*, the third phase of my research journey, I looked specifically at how my expectations coupled with my recent on-site experience may have altered my understanding and perception of RIB.

This phase was triggered about five months after the expedition when it became apparent I would not be returning to RIB, and therefore the reliance upon memory became so much more important as a way of informing my new perception of the site<sup>32</sup>.

### **GPS Tracks**

Initially, in an effort to recapture the experience and facilitate my memory of the expedition to RIB, I carried out a series of art Actions in early 2016. These Actions were in effect, to retrace my steps taken on site at RIB within my current urban environment, as if I was following the route that I took from the campground at Newlands Cascades to RIB, and back, in my four hours of wanderings at the site. I was inspired by Gerry Smith and Bernhard Huwilers' *D is for Drawing* art performance, where they retraced the outline of past cities in trails of blue sand and documented the line (Phister 1997), however in this case the trace was a virtual GPS track. To make this work I used a Global Positioning System (GPS) digital trace (Image 33) that tracked my RIB site movements on land and river. It is important to note the 'track' was not georeferenced to the site, which meant it was ostensibly a two dimensional digital mapping layer<sup>33</sup>. These two track layers are beautiful in their simplicity and detail, and purposeful in their own right – charged with memory for me, but seemingly just two-dimensional random squiggles to other viewers. The combination of my Soldier and Scientist personas, my memory of the site, combined with these GPS track layers that enabled me to undertake the artistic Actions back in Hobart.

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<sup>32</sup> Whilst Kiefer's memory-related works were key to my personal processing and reflection of this phase, his overall style and practice became influential during the final installation artworks.

<sup>33</sup> During the final stages of the rafting expedition, and for safety whilst solo at the remote site, I had maintained a GPS locator on my person in case of emergency. This device gave me a data track based upon the Military Grid Reference System 1984 (MGRS). It was this raw data that I was later able to display graphically on the standard World Geodetic System 1984 (WGS84) topographical datum map as a digital line path.



Image 33 – *GPS trace of walking and rafting movements at RIB (2015)*. Graphical display of MGRS GPS data. Dimensions variable.

This re-walking of the RIB route in Hobart forced me to re-enact and remember every deviation, every clambering over a rock, and where I tentatively crossed the river scud. These Actions combined provided an immersive experience that enabled me to recall with amazing clarity the route and sights I had seen, and also permanently fix those memories in my psyche. In Phister (1997), Smith and Huwiler describe their act of tracing out a large drawing as “like music” and “zen-like”, whilst I found it to be a highly immersive moment of memory.

I retraced and recreated my steps with the Actions at locations in Hobart (works *GPS Track-1* and *GPS Track-2*), locations intrinsically linked with RIB and the loaded history associated with *Morning Mist*, *Rock Island Bend*. I recreated the walk on a scale matching RIB both in front of Tasmania’s Parliament House, and on the approaches to Hydro Tasmania, the agency that was once the Hydro Electric Commission, is renowned for its attempt to dam the Franklin River in the 1980s. Each of these locations are integral to the Franklin-Gordon protest movement of the early 1980s, and hence to RIB as a historically contested site.



Image 34 - *GPS Track-1* (2015). GPS data track overlain on aerial photography. 0.82x0.55m.



Image 35 - *GPS Track-2* (2015). GPS data track overlain on aerial photography. 0.82x0.5m.

In order to document these wanderings, I traced them with another hand-held GPS device, however this time, the tracks reveal my diversions around benches, roads, fences and the

structures of the city. This action enabled me to relive the site, to experience the scale, steps, at location once again, yet simultaneously and corporeally, I was reacting and 'being in' the city. This experience, filtered through my memories, served to create an enduring connection between my current urban world and the wild site of RIB.

### **Weather**

Peter Dombrovskis' image is loaded with weather indicators: mist, cool colours, flowing water, moss, absence of harsh sunlight etcetera. And secondly, Hydro Tasmania maintains an automated Franklin River water level and rainfall monitor with daily data (Hydro Tasmania 2016).

Having spent nine days on the river and in the South West Tasmania World Heritage Area, experiencing the rain, cold, sun and heat of the site, the access to the Franklin River water level, rainfall data provided a relatively straight forward experiential leap to take the raw data numbers, and then, in my imagination, visualise the corresponding conditions at RIB.

The weather at RIB at the time of my trip was initially almost identical to the weather depicted in Peter Dombrovskis' image, followed a few hours later by sunny and clear weather conditions. Therefore, at the times of storms, drought or fierce weather events, I have no direct site-specific mental reference point available to make an accurate visual comparison. However, after some weeks of idly watching the water levels there was a massive downpour on the west coast of Tasmania and in my imagination, using my memory of the site visit, the knowledge from my personal past in my scientific personas and the raw spreadsheet data on the screen in my studio, I could imagine the torrents, the destruction, the power of the rapids. I could hear the roar. I could shiver with the chill mists. I felt the fear of the flood without needing to be there. Yet all this visualisation is a form of conjecture that led me all the way back to the *Anticipation* phase where I was visualising the site based upon my expectations.

I realised there were many other *holes* in the available data when I applied those rationalist personas, the Scientist and Engineer: spring vegetation flowering, summer die-off of plants, stormy weather, and snow-fall for example. Each of these influences and on site events are objective experiences that I did not manage to have in my short site visit. Then of course it became apparent this research is about enhancing and unfolding understanding of a site,

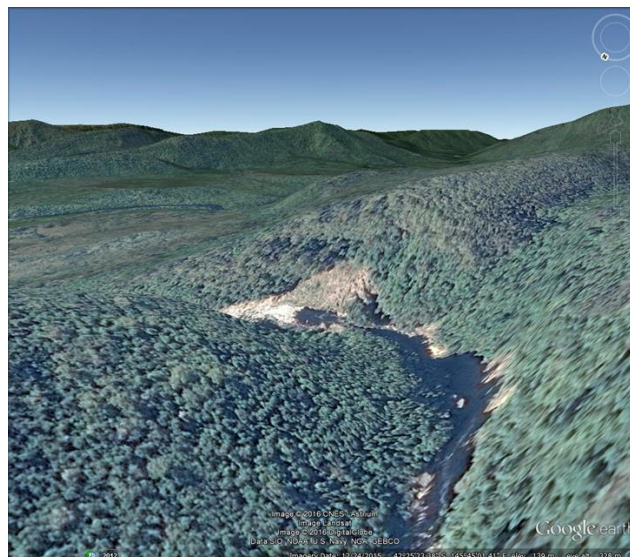


not about complete understanding. When utilising my rationalist, objective personas I inherently biased my responses away from the emotive, subjective which are in and of themselves equally valid sources and responses to RIB. In light of this 'bias', my imagination and projection will always play a role in the viewer's experience of the art and site itself<sup>34</sup>.

### **Digital Terrain**

The *Digital Terrain* series ended up being a dead-end of sorts in terms of visualising and engaging with the site. The results were practical, simple to achieve, and mainly derived through using commercial off-the-shelf free software information on platforms such as *Google Earth*.

The research value in visualising the terrain in 3D was three-fold; firstly, it is an enormously powerful tool for a remote viewer to gain an appreciation of site and topography, secondly, and perhaps more profoundly, the use of 3D terrain mapping is not limited by the creator's perspective or a single fixed point of view which means viewers may control and move throughout the site freely thereby making their own assessment and driving their own engagement with the site. This is a clear divergence from Peter Dombrovskis' image, where the freedom to move virtually augments the choice of the photographer of how he oriented and framed the image of a site.



**Image 36** – *Upstream Approach to Rock Island Bend* (2016). Screen capture image from Google Earth ([www.google.com.au/earth/](http://www.google.com.au/earth/)). Dimensions variable.

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<sup>34</sup> In the end I kept monitoring the weather data purely as an academic exercise in imagination and visualisation.

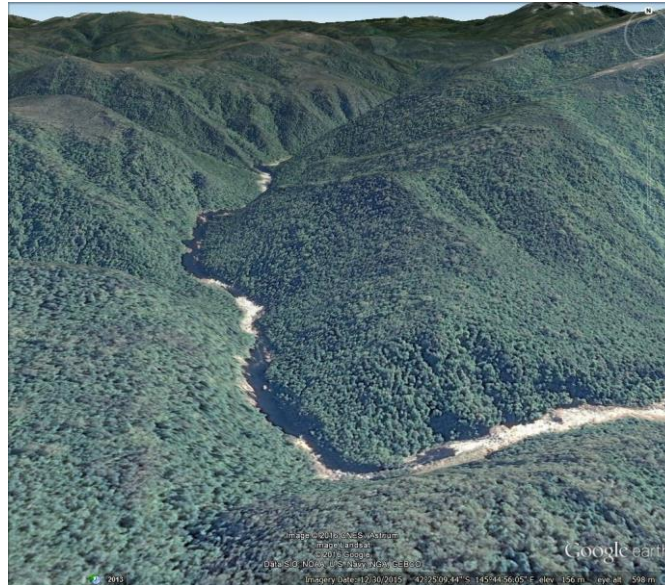


Image 37 – *Westerly View of Rock Island Bend* (2016). Screen capture image from Google Earth ([www.google.com.au/earth/](http://www.google.com.au/earth/)). Dimensions variable.

The resulting images, fly-throughs, terrain models and electronic maquettes I considered to be aesthetically beautiful, and viewers I guided through the site digitally reacted favourably to the digital visualisation and expressed feelings of having gained a far richer appreciation of location, surrounds, topography, and the river than simply viewing a map or 2D still image.

### Light

The *Light* series constitutes a long sequence of experiments that recreate the tones and shadows of the site visit to RIB from memory, and also convey the scale and immersion of Peter Dombrovskis' image<sup>35</sup>.

The first *Light* works were table-top studio experiments, utilising lights and found objects to cast shadows and shift tonal intensities in a manner that recreated the formal constructs of Peter Dombrovskis' image, light and shadow experiments that were recorded as digital images. Whilst the desk-top experiments were improvised, they frequently produced visual echoes of the approach to RIB, the small scale only felt as a replication of Peter

<sup>35</sup> Mona Hatoum's 1992 installation work, *Light Sentence*, at the Centre Georges Pompidou (Archer, *et al*, 1997), was a major inspiration here. Hatoum's use of light to simultaneously immerse the viewer, along with the resulting imagery of the cast shadows, was a direct influence on the intended outcomes and experiments of my research project. Mona Hatoum describes the effect created in *Light Sentence*: "This is an environment in constant flux - no single point of view, no solid frame of reference" (Antoni 1998) - this sense of immersion was an objective of my experiments.

Dombrovskis' image<sup>36</sup>, not an immersive experience for the viewer of the physical scale of the site.

I subsequently attempted to recreate the table-top works on a more human scale, to create an actual immersive effect for the viewer, and hence a clearer segue to the site and overall context. I found for the most part that the light sources distracted from the shadows, and the objects casting the shadows tended to become the focus of the viewers' attention rather than the projected shadows themselves.

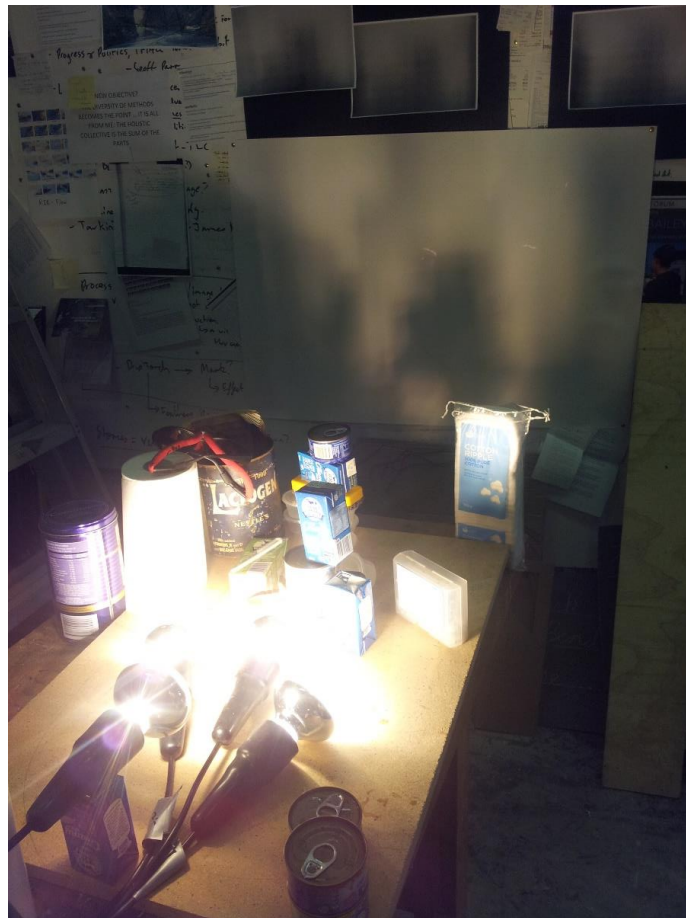


Image 38 – *Light 14* (2016). Table-top experiment with found objects and incandescent light fittings with white paper screen. 1.5x1.5x2.5m (approx.).

Rather than serve as a stand-alone series of work, the *Light* series has been incorporated into the gallery installation as a means to enhancing the immersive effect of *Angles*.

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<sup>36</sup> Typically less than a metre squared, the light and shadows cast were of a scale that mimicked hung paintings or gallery spaces.



## **TRANSFER AND COMMUNICATION**

*"I think that's what art is: art is communication made in the hope that interesting miscommunications will arise."*

Misha Glouberman, 2011

I came to realise that through trying to communicate to others an enhanced understanding of RIB, beyond what they may anticipate by viewing Peter Dombrovskis' image, is still inherently framed by my own point of view. My work is yet another addition to the available understanding of RIB that others may have.

As a conflation of my experiences, this project contributes to the viewer's own anticipations, experience and memories of the site. Each of my four phases and their related outputs provide viewers with a case study of a journey, which adds to their own expectations, filters, anticipations, disappointments, inspirations and eventually their understanding.

This final phase of the research project became for me as artist and journeyman, an opportunity to take my new-found understanding of the site from the analysis of Peter Dombrovskis' image, coupled with my lived on-site experiences, and provide this to others. This is based upon two key research questions: does an increased analytical understanding improve viewers' appreciation of a site? And secondly, how can my personas, and hence my own perspectives, add to other viewers' understanding of the RIB site beyond what they see through Peter Dombrovskis' image?

I therefore focussed my attention during this phase on utilising mediums and scales that broadened the viewers' exposure to differing experiences and points of view of the site. Additionally, I saw this as the opportunity to reassemble the disparate views and understandings that looking at RIB with separate personas had produced. Therefore, in this phase, the methods and artworks I utilised tended to be those that combined the results and data from the previous phases of the research journey, such as *Webcam* and the *Angles* installation.

### **United Nations Proposal**

Memory and temporal distance from the site gave me opportunity to express my recent experience and understanding through humour. I was developing methods through which I

could communicate my new appreciation of RIB to strangers who had never been to (or perhaps even heard of) the place. I then realised the transfer of knowledge through activism stimulates appreciation and empathy, thereby increasing the likelihood of a person valuing a site and wanting to protect it. In response I decided to do something in order to protect RIB and submitted legislative proposals to the United Nations and the International Court of Justice for legal resolutions and protection orders.

Using publically available instructions sourced from the websites of both the United Nations and the International Court of Justice, I wrote a fictional scenario of environmental freedom fighters, encroaching threats, and crimes against the natural environment. From this I faked an assumed level of knowledge (that is, that the United Nations and the International Court of Justice would already be aware of the ongoing “fighting and oppression at Rock Island Bend”), all crafted in the wording of United Nations Resolutions from other unrelated but similar circumstances to the fictional scenarios. I submitted by email the “United Nations Resolution 2235” and the “Submission to the International Court of Justice”, each correctly formatted and meeting the required deadlines. The justification for the submissions was “for the legal protection and international discussion of Rock Island Bend”<sup>37</sup>.

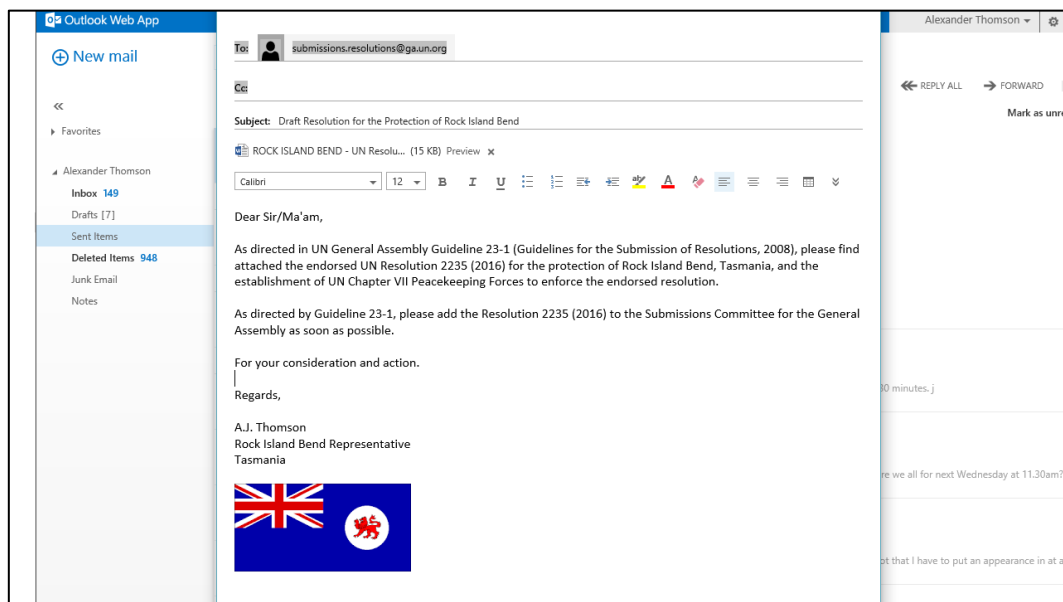


Image 39 - *Submission Email for UN Resolution 2235 (2016)*. Screenshot of email submitted to the United Nations. Dimensions variable.

<sup>37</sup> The submission process for International Court of Justice and the United Nations, are outlined at: <http://www.icj-cij.org/court/index.php?p1=1&p2=6> and [http://www.un.org/en/ga/guidelines\\_submission\\_draft\\_reso.pdf](http://www.un.org/en/ga/guidelines_submission_draft_reso.pdf) respectively.

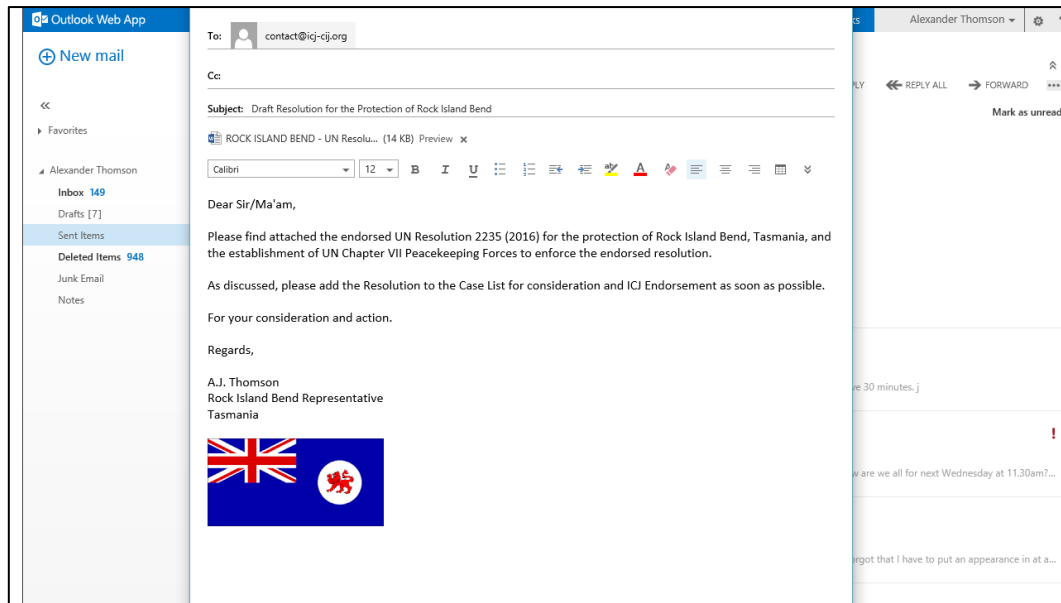


Image 40 - *Submission Email for Motion to the International Court of Justice (2016)*. Screenshot of email submitted to the International Court of Justice. Dimensions variable.

Unfortunately, I received no replies from either institution, however, I do continue to enjoy the possibility that somewhere in New York there is at least one intern or Legal Clerk at the United Nations, and somewhere in The Hague, who were tasked with fact-checking the situation at RIB as a result of my emails. It intrigues and pleases me to think there are now at least two strangers on the other side of the world, who know more than they had ever expected about a remote river bend site in South Western Tasmania.

### Webcam

At the time of writing of this exegesis, the tentatively titled *Webcam* was yet to be installed.

*Webcam* is central to the conceptual narrative of the exhibition. So much of my research explores a viewer's impression of a site they have not visited, and based upon someone else's visual record, which is framed by a series of aesthetic and perspective decisions that result in filtering the site's 'live composition'. *Webcam* is a gesture to acknowledge the vicarious experience of viewing a remote site; to present to each viewer a visual record of a site not experienced by the viewer (in the flesh). From this visual record, in this case, via the displayed screen of the webcam, the viewers must each use their own personas to assemble a judgement and appreciation of the dislocated site.

I needed a site which none of the viewers will likely have seen before, that was unique but accessible to the gallery: my studio space. My studio space is the site of my constant 'unearthing' of the RIB image: the site during this research project where I have delved in to the site of RIB with all my personas over the last two years, in order to experience of what I had previously only known through viewing Peter Dombrovskis' iconic image.

That the studio is not a natural landscape or beautiful by conventional standards is irrelevant, what is important is that the viewer is limited by the field of view of the webcam located in the gallery space. From this restricted physical perspective each viewer must make their own analysis and use their own personas (consciously or subconsciously) to undertake an analogous cycle of understanding of a site they cannot access, which is also mitigated through the lens of someone else's vision.

This experience replicates the process of viewer's comprehension of RIB. Through a remote *web cam view* of my space, viewers are afforded the opportunity to 'see' my own observations of this site, that is, like Peter Dombrovskis' image and RIB, their experience of my studio as a site is mitigated through my choices of what to display.

By denying physical access to my studio, (as the remote site), viewers experience and understanding of that site will remain elusive. Therefore, they too must process the webcam image in their consciousness using their own personas, to create a holistic understanding based upon their anticipations and expectations.

### **Angles**

The *Angles* installation and 2016 maquettes are a direct outcome from the recurring linear motif developed in the *Angles* series discussed earlier in this chapter.

Upon reflection it became apparent that the linearity of the site is accurately and in essence well reflected in the seven sight lines and linear features identified back at the start of the research project in 2015. It became obvious that a studio or gallery approach to communicating an appreciation of this morphology, and formal nature of the site and image, could be to create an immersive experience of these features.

For the final exhibition, I installed a small set of maquettes testing the quantity, layout, angles and type of both linear and planar features, with the intention of creating an

immersive sculpture to provide a sense of scale and form to their understanding of RIB. I saw the use of materials as an opportunity to test the linear layout, and add conceptual depth, where the materials themselves would take on meaning. Ropes, chains, steel cables, and even light beams were tested as a means to creating linear effects. In the end I decided on canvas planar features anchored with cabling, where the edges of the canvas create the linear feature angles, coupled with the scale and concealing effect of the canvas. These were intended to provide immersive impact and so serve to manifest a feeling of experience and appreciation of RIB within the gallery space.

This immersive view will only replicate RIB from a single point: a key installation feature that relates to ideas of physical perspective - Dombrovskis' camera position choice, my own artistic persona perspectives, and the viewer's experience - ensures that the test maquettes of *Angles* and the final immersive *Angles* installation only work when viewed from precisely one single point on the gallery floor. Viewed from anywhere else in the gallery space the works are a discordant mass of angles and views blocked by planar features. The single point-of-view position locates the viewer in my perspective and Peter Dombrovskis' own literal point of view and anywhere outside that floor point is an opportunity to move through Rock Island Bend.

### **The Sum of All Parts**

In a sense this discussion is the culmination of all of my persona experiments. By viewing RIB through both Peter Dombrovskis' image as well as in person, all three previous phases (*Anticipation*, *Experience* and *Memory*) utilising the eyes of a Soldier, as a Geologist, as a Scientist, Romantic, Historian and Firefighter, have provided me with a deeper appreciation of the site and Dombrovskis' image.

So did I find that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts? The simple answer is a resounding 'yes'. And the reasoning is now clear as by viewing the artwork, and consciously experiencing the site through the disciplines and sensitivities of each of my personas, through the act of breaking my viewing process down; through quantitatively and qualitatively activating my understanding and engagement with the site, my understanding of Rock Island Bend has now become a matter of deep experience, appreciation and knowledge, that transcends aesthetic encounter.

**Summary**

The results frame a number of conclusions that reflect a deeper comprehension of my cognitive processes, and greater understanding of the scope of materiality and method within my studio practice.

The key final result of the four phases, in tandem with the application of a Scientific Cognitivist approach in order to separate, analyse and reassemble a comprehensive and holistic experience, confirms the whole can in fact be greater than the sum of its parts. That scientific cognitivism has its place in enhancing an understanding and appreciation of a site, both as a direct experience and when viewing the site through an artist's own vision, increases the viewer's engagement and experience towards a more significant aesthetic moment.

## **CONCLUSION**

The final outcome of the research project includes a body of sculptural works, generated through diverse methods and materials, which explore my own unique relationship to and understanding of the site of Rock Island Bend.

**One of my key research questions asked, how over time may a viewer's perception of a site change when influenced by both an artistic interpretation and direct experience of the site?**

RIB was used as a case study as it resonated with me both objectively as a Scientist, Soldier, Engineer and a Firefighter. I used these personas to distil what I saw and experienced of the site through a series of relatively objective, quantitative processes. I also explored and consciously manipulated how RIB impacts upon me subjectively, through emotional connection to the wildness, the beauty and framed by the love my wife had for RIB. These modes of objective and subjective perception were expressed via my personas, each of the unique parts of me that collectively constitute my individual character.

As an artist, I found that I could move freely between these personas and modes of viewing; expressed as my *Points of View*. The research documented these experiences, observations, feelings and responses when looking at RIB in Peter Dombrovskis' image, as well as *in situ*. The resulting works acknowledge that Dombrovskis' image had shaped my expectations and understanding; that due to the photograph I had a pre-conceived idea of what I expected to see at the site, and that the depth and range of that expectation was defined by the personal history I brought to initially viewing the image.

I found that with the passing of time, the more life I lived, the more I learnt, the consequently the more I came to see and comprehend in the image and the site. Despite these inherent pre-conceptions and expectations, the reality of the site visit still managed to affect me in unexpected ways; there were entire fields of site-readings that I didn't expect, such as the palaeontology or the weather, the volume of noise, the fatigue I felt and the insects that attacked me, even the human company was unanticipated. The "live" experience richly supplemented and exceeded my knowledge beyond objective understanding. As a consequence of this incredible journey, the site of RIB had become

intimate with my life story, and even if only for a four-hour window of time, I became a part of Rock Island Bend.

**The second research question examined cognitive processes when viewing a site through the mediated lens of an artwork, and on the ground.**

In particular I asked how a Scientific Cognitivist approach to viewing and understanding an image and a site impacts on the experience. The conscious act of dissecting the site and artwork and as an experience (via measureable and scientifically almost clinical, sterile understanding), paired with subjective emotive responses and humanist reactions, served to break my viewing process down, then quantitatively and qualitatively enrich my understanding and enjoyment of the site. Through this conscious dissection and reassembly, my understanding and appreciation has now become a matter of personal connection and knowledge. These lessons are applicable beyond my personal experience; in documenting a case study for applying a Scientific Cognitivist approach to understanding and appreciating a site (and all that it entails) contributes to the field of experience, representation and interpretation.

Through this process of research; in documenting the heuristic process, along with the disciplined and explorative deconstruction and *resemblage*, I have found a great personal joy and self-satisfaction. With greater knowledge and understanding comes an appreciation of complexity. The very fact that each of these processes have an emotive impact on me is a definitive, affirmative response to the research itself.

Progressing the research questions was simultaneous as I documented my understanding and appreciation of the site over time and via the artwork and the location, I concurrently deconstructed each of these stages and utilised my various personas to dissect and analyse in order to understand, then reassemble this new-found understanding into a collective, holistic understanding.

The studio and field research undertaken was supported by readings relating to site, place, perspective, Scientific Cognitivism and aesthetic experience. Such readings provided a foundation to understand the journey I was undertaking, in particular providing the language and written context (and expression) to process the results and understand how my own experience was changing with time. The work of artists Robert Smithson, Mona



Hatoum, Anselm Kiefer, as well as writers Miwon Kwon and Simon Schama, revealed the inherently personal relationship that humans bring to understanding a site or location. Kwon's discussions of site and site-specificity (and whether or not "site" is relocatable or replicable), and Smithson's proposed notion of the *non-site* provided key point of guidance and discussion for my own research journey.

The studio works undertaken convey two streams of activity: methods of experimenting and understanding distinct aspects or cycles of response when regarding RIB within specific personas; and the production of artworks that contribute to others experiences of RIB.

The artworks pose an interruption between the viewer's perception of the Peter Dombrovskis' photograph and RIB as a real site; a disruption of the cycle between viewer to artwork and to site. I see their collective function as sparks that ignite a new appreciation and multifaceted understanding.

This research has led me to further expand my own art practice. I have greatly expanded my studio practice specifically in relation to photography, digital works and text-based art. I have also engaged 'emotional media'; acknowledging the power and impact of my own subjective responses, utilising my personal experiences and relations and connections to challenge modes of encounter, engagement, perception and reception...

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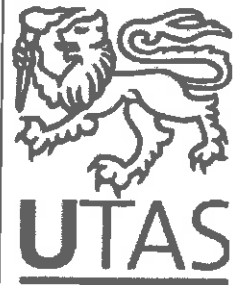
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HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (TASMANIA) NETWORK

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23 June 2015

Mr John Vella  
Tasmanian College of the Arts  
Private Bag 57

Student Researcher: Alexander Thomson

*Sent via email*

Dear Mr Vella

Re: MINIMAL RISK ETHICS APPLICATION APPROVAL  
Ethics Ref: **H0015008 - Contemporary Environmental Art and Activism in Tasmania**

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We are pleased to advise that acting on a mandate from the Tasmania Social Sciences HREC, the Chair of the committee considered and approved the above project on 23 June 2015.

This approval constitutes ethical clearance by the Tasmania Social Sciences Human Research Ethics Committee. The decision and authority to commence the associated research may be dependent on factors beyond the remit of the ethics review process. For example, your research may need ethics clearance from other organisations or review by your research governance coordinator or Head of Department. It is your responsibility to find out if the approval of other bodies or authorities is required. It is recommended that the proposed research should not commence until you have satisfied these requirements.

Please note that this approval is for four years and is conditional upon receipt of an annual Progress Report. Ethics approval for this project will lapse if a Progress Report is not submitted.

The following conditions apply to this approval. Failure to abide by these conditions may result in suspension or discontinuation of approval.

1. It is the responsibility of the Chief Investigator to ensure that all investigators are aware of the terms of approval, to ensure the project is conducted as approved by the Ethics Committee, and to notify the Committee if any investigators are added to, or cease involvement with, the project.

2. Complaints: If any complaints are received or ethical issues arise during the course of the project, investigators should advise the Executive Officer of the Ethics Committee on 03 6226 7479 or [human.ethics@utas.edu.au](mailto:human.ethics@utas.edu.au).
3. Incidents or adverse effects: Investigators should notify the Ethics Committee immediately of any serious or unexpected adverse effects on participants or unforeseen events affecting the ethical acceptability of the project.
4. Amendments to Project: Modifications to the project must not proceed until approval is obtained from the Ethics Committee. Please submit an Amendment Form (available on our website) to notify the Ethics Committee of the proposed modifications.
5. Annual Report: Continued approval for this project is dependent on the submission of a Progress Report by the anniversary date of your approval. You will be sent a courtesy reminder closer to this date. **Failure to submit a Progress Report will mean that ethics approval for this project will lapse.**
6. Final Report: A Final Report and a copy of any published material arising from the project, either in full or abstract, must be provided at the end of the project.

Yours sincerely

Katherine Shaw  
Executive Officer  
Tasmania Social Sciences HREC

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

The following questions were provided prior to, and formed the basis of the discussions during the research project interview series

- Factual questions about Environmental/Activist artworks in Tasmania that the interview subject has been involved in.
- What the participant values when viewing a specific artwork?
- What qualities of that artwork resonate with the participant?
- What artwork(s) (maybe unrelated to the interview subject) do you see that have been influential to you and/or Tasmania?
- What was the intention or objective behind the artwork(s) created as part of your issue?
- What did the Environmental/Activist artwork(s) impact upon?
- What observations can be made about the effectiveness of Environmental and Activist art? In particular in relation to specific artwork(s)?
- Were there any unanticipated benefits or problems arising from the creation of the artwork(s)?
- What was the process behind creating of the artwork(s) – what was the relationship between the creativity and the issue?
- What drove the choice of style or method?
- What art/creative methods worked particularly well?
- Where do you see Environmental or Activist Art going in the future?